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A GRAPHIC HISTORY
OF HORROR COMICS



BY
PEDRO GABEZUELA





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INTRODUCTION

AS A CHILD GROWING UP IN THE 1970s, MY EXPOSURE TO THE HORROR GENRE WAS LIMITED,

to say the least. A restricted rating in Ontario meant that even with the aid of an adult, there was no way I was entering the cinema to see *Melrose Place*. As for television, in those barren days before home video or pay channels, the scariest thing I was likely to see was *Scooby and the Ghost Chasers*. Sure, I'd occasionally stumble upon a horror flick on the tube, but those were heavily edited and, at any rate, they aired way past my bedtime.

No, my earliest horror memories spring from the local 7-Eleven comic book spinner rack. Here was a world that any six-year-old could easily enter. After all, those panels depicted comic books with superheroes and fuzzy animals, not gory tales of the macabre. And unlike movie theaters, the counter clerk couldn't care less if you were spending your 35 cents on Archie's *Pals 'n' Gals* or *The Tomb of Dracula*.

Timing, as they say, is everything, and it was fortunate that my discovery of horror comics coincided with their long-awaited rebirth. After the scandal caused by Dr. Fredric Wertham's damning book *Sed-*

uction of the Innocent and the subsequent creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in the mid-1950s, horror comics vanished off newsstands. Gone went vampires, werewolves and ghosts, replaced with giant mutant monsters and laboratory experiments. Gone wrong. While these books are not without merit,

lovers of traditional, gothic horror had little to sink their teeth into.

However, by the late 1960s, many comic creators began to challenge the CCA, and the organization slowly loosened its grip. DC Comics' *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets* returned to tales of terror. Marvel Comics released a slew of classic titles including *Werewolf by Night*, *Monsters of Frankenstein* and *The Tomb of Dracula*. Even superheroes jumped on the horror bandwagon—it wasn't unusual to see Spider-Man or Batman battling



the creatures of the night. All these titles may be 100-year lame by today's standards, but for horror-starved readers of the time, they were valuable portals.

And that's where I came in. Already toiling on a steady diet of superhero adventures, horror comics were synonymous with forbidden pleasures. If my parents knew what I was reading they undoubtedly would have ripped the pages from my little fingers.



Premature burials, vampirism, murders most foul, dismemberment — my childhood was filled with vivid four-colour imagery that still haunts me.

I'll never forget Swamp Thing's train battle with a band of punk vampires (to this day, punk rockers terrify me more than the undead), Batman's near-death struggle with a giant plant monster, a *House of Mystery* story where an elderly miser is buried alive, and any thing drawn by Gene Colan. To my irrepressible mind, these images were more potent than anything *The Beatles* could throw up.

My true defining moment, however, came in 1962 when I stumbled upon a copy of the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* comic adaptation at a used bookstore. At eleven-years-old, there was no way I was going to see George A. Romero's *Jaws* like, death's living homage to the classic B-C comics. The printed version, however, was within my grasp, and for a mere dollar!

Reader, I bought that comic. And, like the young boy on the cover, I devoured it. From that day on I was a bona fide, card-carrying horror fan. More explicit — and more twisted — than anything I had read to date, the stories buried themselves into my subconscious to such an extent that when I finally saw the movie many years later, it couldn't help but creep out!

I'm sure you have your own special memory of discovering the joys and terror that horror comics can bring — that first, almost sinful thrill as you eagerly devour

what's on the page. Hopefully you'll rediscover it within these pages.

Whether it's an old copy of *Tales From the Crypt* or a recent issue of *Hellboy*, horror comics continue to provide some of the best stories ever told in the horror genre. A quick comparison of the *Walking Dead* comic to the television show proves how much more daring, imaginative and downright goner the illustrated page can be.

This book chronicles some of the high points in horror comics of the last 75 years. One of the most striking aspects of the press that hit me as I was compiling the book is not only the sheer variety that the format has given us through the decades, but the high level of quality it has maintained. Regardless of the era, pre- or post-Code, newsstand or direct market, mainstream or independent, there is always something to admire and, more importantly, to enjoy.

So if you think you might skip an article or two because up 'til now you've had no interest in that era, that book or that creator — please stop and reconsider. Because every single comic covered in this book has contributed in some way to the History of Horror (and many continue to do so). And to every writer, artist and editor that's mentioned in these pages, thank you for further nightmares, breaking barriers, and thrilling and inspiring the kid in all of us.

PEDRO CASAREDO

1930s AND '40s: SHUDDER PULPS

BY DON HUTCHIN

BEFORE COMIC BOOKS, THERE WAS PULP FICTION. BACK IN THE DAYS OF BREAD LINES AND HOBO JUNGLES, millions of readers hungrily devoured thrills in the pages of cheaply produced magazines printed on rough pulped paper. Known as "the pulps," these all-fiction titles catered to every imaginable reading taste, from detective yarns to jungle stories, from jangle adventures to science fiction and even romance. But the wildest of them all were the notorious horror tomes, known collectively as the shudder pulps.

The so-called "shudder" or "weird epics" titles were a blood-red splash of colour in the grey days of the Great Depression. They announced their nastiness with shock-paired covers featuring voluptuous, underdressed beauties pierced by barbs of living knowledge as bent as boomerangs. Their promise: cheap thrills, and plenty of them.

In the nightmare universe of the shudder pulps, it was always at midnight, stormy night. Tattered souls suffered in the clutches of mad surgeons, warped scientists and twisted cultists, eagerly abetted by legions of deranged dwarfs and bony hunchbacks. They stripped, whipped and boiled their convulsing victims

With the enthusiasm of medieval inquisitors. Even the feeblest rock-jawed heroes of these stories suffered a purgatory of horrors in order to rescue the fair maidens.

For all their sex-and-violence notoriety, the shudder pulps adhered to a simple basic requirement: the reader must be entertained at all costs. It was a time when work-ethics jangle might seep in fantasy, so as a rule,

the more prospectuous the fantasy world, the easier it was to forget one's own problems.

The shudder pulps had their genesis with a neomercantile young publisher named Henry Steeger, a graduate of Princeton University and the University of Berlin and a former editor at Dell Publications. In late 1925, when Steeger was in his mid-20s, he borrowed money and, with partner Harold Goldsmith, started the Popular Publications pulp chain. Some of the company was churning out crime-fiction magazines. Some, like *Dime Detective* thrived, while others, most notably *Dime Mystery* book, failed to catch on.

Inspiration struck Steeger during a trip to Paris where he attended one of the notorious shock plays of the Théâtre du Grand Guignol—a theatrical company that horrified audiences with its productions featuring explicit depictions of torture and mutilation.



Stroger perceived literary possibilities in transferring Grand Guignol into pulp. He lightened the brow with the addition of southern European influences: the gothic novel. A phenomenon of the late 18th century, gothic literature was a movement that focused on imperiled heroines, demented villains, death, terror, decay and a pervasive atmosphere of supernaturalism.

October of 1933 saw a re-birth of Stroger's ailing *Dime Mystery Book* under its abbreviated title *Dime Mystery*, and bearing the subtitle *The Most-Startling Stories Ever Told*. The magazine's lead tale went to pulp god Norvell Page, whose "Dance of the Skeletons" asked, "Who was the flesh destroyer? How could a living man become a meat-less nightmare in two short hours?" The answer involved Manhattan gangsters eaten by parasites. Page's story was a gruesome beginning, but set the tone for greater horrors to come.

Readers responded with relish, and Popular Publications soon produced two companion monthlies. *Terror Tales* and *Horror Stories* interest continued to grow, and soon other publishers rushed in with similar books.

Chief among the imitators was publisher Ned Kelly, whose *Thrilling Mystery* was a clone of *Dime Mystery*. Typically flashy titles such as "When Death Came Knocking" accompanied razor-sharp cover art by Rudolph Balinski, which advertised menstrosities such as giant spiders, grinning gorillas and living skeletons. Soon, more publishers waded into the fray with titles including *Adel Mystery*, *Dime Mystery*, *Dark Stories* and *Spicy Mystery*, published by Harry Dawesold (later the founder of DC Comics) and Frank Asner under the stable brand of Culture Publications.

Publisher Martin Goodman (who went on to create what would become Marvel Comics) attempted to out-horror the competition with his grisly *Red Circle* pulps *Unspeakable Tales* and *Mystery Tales*. Writers were instructed to go for the throat, and such shock-effect treats as "Lovely Bodies for the Blucher," "The Claw Will Come to Carica Me" and "Yick, Lovely Mollers, to the Blood Mixer" brought fresh meaning to the term "sude-musculation."



Of course, it didn't take long to reach the breeding point. Like comic books, later experience in the 1950s, the pulps came under hostile scrutiny. Public do-gooders soon discovered that themes of necrophilia, pedophilia and Satanism could easily be found in their local newsstands.

When New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia threatened to rid his city of see-and-sensate magazines, publishers reacted in fear of being newsstand sales as well as their US postal mailing privileges. As shudder-pulp stalwart Bruce Fisher described it, "clean-up organizations started throwing their weight around and gave editors, librarians and writers were instructed to put pencils and brassieres on the girls."

Unfortunately, in discerning key ingredients of their appeal, the magazines suffered. And with the coming of World War II in 1939, the extent of human weakness and misery could no longer be viewed — much less enjoyed — as mere fiction.

Soon after, *Dime Mystery* was renamed as a straight mystery magazine. *Spicy Mystery* soldered on for a while, but was then retitled *Spicy Mystery: Terror Tales* and *Horror Stories* were shut down in 1941. Pulp fiction's bloody reign of terror had ended, not with a bang but with a whimper.

However, the format had made an indelible mark on pop culture and would prove to be highly influential on the new comic book market. Many writers and publishers in the pulp industry moved to comics in the late 1930s, and many early comics drew inspiration from crime and mystery pulps.

The majority of comics in the 1930s and '40s stayed away from the more unsavory aspects of the shudder pulps. Possibly this was a result of the backlash suffered by their publishers, or the fact that America's involvement in the war meant a surge of patriotic superhero titles. However, the legacy of the shudder pulps would rear its head with a vengeance once the post-war dust settled, and its influence would transform the American comics market forever.

GOLDEN AGE BATMAN

FOR MANY, FILMS SUCH AS TIM BURTON'S *BATMAN* (1989) AND CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S *The Dark Knight* (2008) came as something of a revelation. Those movies served to dispel popular notions of the Caped Crusader as a gadget-happy, wisecracking crimebuster. Suddenly Gotham City was darker, grittier and a lot more horrific. While this was nothing new to those who had been reading his comic exploits on a regular basis, the emergence of the Dark Knight was a shock for viewers who were familiar with the character solely through Adam West's 1960s TV interpretation.

While Burton in particular had been clearly influenced by such seminal '80s books as Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, the retro design of his first Batman film indicates he was also turning his gaze back to the very origins of the character. Before the camp of the 1960s, the sci-fi shenanigans of the '50s, and the artistic repression of the late '40s, there was the horror of Batman. Heavily influenced by the genre films of the '20s and '30s, the character's early exploits played out in the shadowy

underworld of a city crawling with nightmarish villains.

In 1938, National Allied Publications (which eventually became DC Comics) published *Action Comics* #1, featuring the debut of Superman. His fly-away success had them itching for yet another dynamic creation, this time for their flagship title *Detective Comics*. Enter 22-year-old artist Bob Kane and his writing partner Bill Finger, 21. Together they created the mysterious Batman (sometimes "Bat-Man").

The pair's influences included everything from pulp hero The Shadow to swashbuckling actor Douglas Fairbanks. However, two fictional characters stand head and shoulders above the others when it came to shaping Kane and Finger's masked crimefighter. For the Batman's keen intellect, the pair drew on master sleuth Sherlock Holmes (the title was *Detective Comics*, after all). For his awesome and menacing look, cast your gaze no further than the 1928 movie *The Bat*, remade in 1930 as *The Bat Whispers*.

Both films are based on the stage play by Mary Roberts Rinehart, in which a jewel thief dressed as a giant bat terrorizes a small household. The imagery of the Bat spreading huge wings and swooping down





on his victims is an obvious precursor to Kane and Finger's creation.

Batman debuted in *Detective Comics* #27 (cover dated May 1939) in "The Case of the Chemical Syndicate," where readers were introduced to millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne and his shadowy alter ego. Batman was an immediate success, and before long his popularity grew to match — and sometimes even surpass — Superman's.

Yet Batman was a drastic contrast to the Man of Steel. Whereas Superman lived in an open, bright, sprawling futuristic city (named, appropriately, Metropolis), Batman resided in a dark, claustrophobic urban nightmare called Gotham City. And while Superman mostly tangled with thugs and evil scientists while involving himself in working-man social issues, Batman dealt with brutal killers, sadistic villains and mad scientists — all staples of the popular pulp magazines that obviously helped shape the Caped Crusader.

And let us not forget Batman's horrific origin, revealed to readers in *Detective Comics* #33. While Dark Kent grew up in a loving and nurturing household, Bruce Wayne saw his parents viciously mur-

dered in front of him, leading him to embark on an obsessive crusade against crime.

Finally, while Superman used his terrific powers to intimidate his adversaries, Batman consciously and deliberately used his appearance to frighten criminals. "Criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot," Wayne famously mused. "My disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night. Black, terrible... a bat!"

Batman obviously takes elements from the kind of vampire characters whose popularity peaked in the 1930s after the success of Bela Lugosi's *Dracula*," explains Dr. Travis Langley, author of *Batman and Psychology: A Dark and Stormy Knight* (John Wiley and Sons, 2012). "That scalloped cape of his, resembling bat wings, had already appeared on some comic book vampires. In many ways, Batman is about fear — causing it, overcoming it, putting it to a good purpose. When we're in the worst of predicaments, on the darkest night in the worst part of town, that's when we need help the most. That's when we need someone who lives in that darkness to step up and help us. In the places where none of society's bright, shining, happy people dare go, we need someone darker and grimmer to step up and do the right thing."

Batman's debut issue featured a routine murder mystery, but by issue #29 he was ready to tackle his first macabre foe, Doctor Death, who was prescribing death to wealthy men by way of a deadly pollen extract. While not destined to become a major villain in the Bat-annals, Doctor Death provided a blueprint of sorts for rogues to come: a twisted scientist working out of a large laboratory, ensnaring millionaires. And in what was to become a common element of the Bat-villain, Doctor Death is hideously disfigured (in this case, by fire).

It wasn't until issue #31, however, that Batman plunged headlong into horror by going up against a vampire known simply as the Monk. In a story highly reminiscent of *Dracula*, Batman must save his fiancée, Julie Madison, from the vampire's grasp. Along the way he encounters a seductive vampire woman named Dala (who bears a striking resemblance to Gloria Holden's character in the 1936 film *Dracula's Daughter*) and a pack of werewolves.

Yet *Dracula* was not the only movie Kane and Finger drew on for inspiration. In *Batman* #1 (Spring 1940),

Professor Hugo Strange introduced in *Detective Comics* #36) from five inmates from an insane asylum and turns them into giant man-monsters. If shades of the 1932 *Island of Dr. Moreau* adaptation *Island of Lost Souls* aren't enough, Finger also manages to throw in some King Kong (1933) during the story's climax when one of the creatures climbs the Empire State Building. Incidentally, when Strange reappears in *Detective Comics* #46, he's wielding a "fear dust" that leaves its victims paralyzed with fright—a technique that would be utilized and popularized by future Bat-villain the Scarecrow.

Boris Karloff's *The Mask of Fu Manchu* (1932) is echoed in *Detective Comics* #35, featuring a cursed statue covered by a Chinatown gangster named Sin Fang. Four issues later, Bat returns to Chinatown to take on a hatchet-throwing villain in a story called "The Horde of the Green Dragon." This issue, with images of sins embedded in people's heads, particularly echoes the shudder pulps and is startlingly violent, especially considering that by this point Robin had jumped into the scene.

Yes, Robin, the "Sensational Character Find of 1940," who debuted in *Detective Comics* #38 and forever changed the face of comics. Many have criticized the character, citing him as the cause of Batman's descent into mindless camp. Yet Robin's origin, in which young Dick Grayson sees his acrobat parents plunge to their deaths, is no less horrific than his mentor's. Long after the Boy Wonder's introduction, Batman's stories continued to veer toward the violent and grotesque. In fact, two of the most horrific Bat-villains made their deadly debuts post-Robin.

The first, Clayface, was introduced in *Detective Comics* #40, in which he terrorizes the set of a movie called *The Terror*—which just happens to star Julie Madison. After committing several murders while wearing the makeup and costume of the film's villain, Clayface is revealed to be none other than Basil Karlo (a fusion of actors Basil Rathbone and Boris Karloff), a former horror star incensed that one of his elder pictures is being remade without him. The story continues Kane and Finger's habit of referencing horror movies, with Clayface's getup bearing a striking resemblance to the one worn by the killer in *The Cat and the Canary* (1927).

The second, and by far the more popular, was the



Joker. No other Bat-villain has been as notorious or as deadly as Gotham's deranged Clown Prince of Crime. Kane first conceived the character as a killer who resembled a court jester, but Finger found his initial sketch too downish. As luck would have it, the writer happened to have a book containing stills of the 1928 movie *The Man Who Laughs*, starring Conrad Veidt. In the film, Veidt plays a carnival freak whose permanent grin had been carved onto his face during infancy.

But the Joker was no carnival freak. Garbed in a purple trench coat and donning a fedora, he was a vicious killer who injected his victims with a deadly toxin that forced their lip muscles to spread at the moment of their death, forming a haunting and distorted grin.

Debuting in *Batman* #1, the Joker quickly became the Dark Knight's archenemy and has appeared countless times over the decades. Yet his murderous days ended fairly early in the '40s, as the violence and horror that had pervaded *Detective Comics* and *Batman* began to subside. Just as horror was seeing a sharp decline in Hollywood as America entered the Second World War, so too did it vanish from the pages of *Batman*—for a while.

RETURN TO FORM

WHEN THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY WENT INTO EFFECT

in 1954, it was the final nail in the coffin for Batman's first era of horror-centric storylines and characters. Gotham found itself stripped of its dark undertones, and the Caped Crusader essentially became Superman without the powers.

His opponents lost their bite, too, and the '50s saw a subdued Rogues' Gallery that opted for mischief over mayhem.

Just as Kane and Finger drew their inspirations from the films of the time, the writers of the '50s looked to the growing sci-fi movie boom, and soon Batman was fighting three-headed monsters from outer space. The '50s then saw Batman turn groovy and campy—though ironically reaching new levels of popularity.

But the original Dark Knight wasn't dead; he was merely biding his time. The early '70s brought the beginnings of a return to form

as creators rediscovered the character's horror roots. Legendary writer/artist team Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams in particular brought back many of the gothic elements that were prevalent in the '40s, and even pitted Bats against the odd supernatural foe. At the same time, they expanded his Rogues' Gallery by introducing characters such as the monstrous Man-Bat and the demonic Ra's al Ghul.

Since then, Batman has continued to embrace horror, with many of the major storylines of the last few decades containing strong elements of terror: the sadistic violence of Frank Miller's Dark Knight graphic

novels, the psychological brutality of Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke*, the insanity of Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, the ghoulishness of Jeph Loeb's *The Long Halloween* and the urban eastiness of Brian Azzarello's *Joker*.

American Vampire and *Witchy* creator Scott Snyder is the latest writer to heed the Bat's call. Snyder has been spearheading Batman's adventures since late 2010, and high on his agenda was to continue Batman's horrific odyssey, with a strong emphasis on what makes the character tick.

His grand opus was the multi-part "Death of the Family" storyline, spanning several titles and featuring Snyder's take on the Joker. Snyder continued the Joker's portrayal as a ruthless and utterly insane-yet-methodical killer with an arsenal of deadly gimmicks. Snyder and artist Greg Capullo added their own twist, however, by having the

Joker enlist the services of a character called the Dollmaker to cut off his face early in his career, only to reattach it with belts, wires and hooks.

"To me, the best horror is where the monster or the killer isn't just something coming after us but also a projection of the things we're afraid of the most in our own personalities," Snyder says. "And Batman is all about that. He's a creature purely driven by obsession. He really is as maniacal about what he does as the Joker, which is why I think *The Killing Joke* is so brilliant. He really veers towards somebody who belongs in *Arkham Asylum*."





THE CRYPT NEVER CLOSES

BY PAUL GORME

WHEN 25-YEAR-OLD BILL GAINES WAS UNEXPECTEDLY THRUST INTO THE ROLE OF publisher and co-editor of EC Comics, he couldn't

have been less interested — after all, these cheap, gaudy newsprint publications were kids' stuff, right? Not always, it turns out, as Gaines' early indifference eventually turned into passion, thanks to the gory potential of a pen-and-ink army of shuffling corpses.

In just a few years, EC's trend-setting, adult-minded titles — including *Tales From the Crypt* — built the company into one of the most influential publishers of the decade. Although *Tales From the Crypt* and EC Comics' other horror publications spent a mere five years on newsstands after being introduced in 1950, the groundbreaking titles have been consistently revived in some form every decade since their publication, in everything from reprinted collections to films and television shows, prov-

ing their enduring appeal.

"I think the answer is quality," ventures Russ Cochran, a Missouri-based publisher and the person responsible for The EC Archives, lavish hardcover editions of the classic comics. A

fan since his teens, Cochran has untiringly reprinted original EC comics and artwork since 1971.

"The stories and layouts were intelligent and beautifully constructed," he adds. "Reading an Al Feldstein story, you noticed that he used words that mostly were for adults. He never wrote down to his audience — I loved that. Then add the art of the fabulous EC staple of artists, and you have the best comics ever done."

The Gaines family's involvement in the comics business goes right back to the very dawn of the medium when, in 1933, Bill's father Max Gaines hit upon an idea

to republish older daily newspaper comics as a bound anthology to sell on newsstands





Packaging together past strips from popular titles such as "Reglar Follers," "Hartbreath Harry" and "Joe Palooka" under the catch-all title *Famous Funnies*, he created what is now regarded as the forerunner of the modern comic book, a surprise success that virtually kick-started the entire industry. By co-writing future DC Comics owner Harry Donenfeld to publish *Superman*, as well as helping to design other prominent characters, including *Weird Women* and the *Green Lantern*, the elder Gaines continued to play a key role in the evolution of the medium until 1944, when he decided to drastically change directions once again.

Selling his interests in the soaring superhero trend to DC, he started his own company, Educational Comics, to deal exclusively in high-minded publications such as *Picture Stories From the Bible* and *Picture Stories From American History*, alongside kiddie-oriented titles *Animal Fables* and *Tiny Tot Comics*.

Not surprisingly, these well-meaning comics couldn't compete with the thrilling adventures and

squint-jawed heroes regularly published by EC's competitors. In 1947, with the company slowly sinking into debt, another tragedy struck — Max Gaines was killed in a boating accident, leaving his crumbling comics empire in the hands of his son, Bill, who was training to be a science teacher at the time.

Though at first the younger Gaines deferred his duties to a hired business manager, the more comics he read, the more he wanted to take a shot at heading up the flagging company. Jettisoning the high-minded and funny animal comics favoured by his father, Gaines' first order of business was to change the name of the company from "Educational Comics" to "Entertaining Comics" and expand his roster to include more sensational offerings such as *Saddle Justice* and *Cyrene Patrol*.

He also began to assemble a crack team of artists who would soon come to define EC's unique style: Harvey Kurtzman, Johnny Craig, Jack Davis, Wally Wood, Jack Kamen and Graham Ingels, to name a few.

No contributor played more of a key role in the development of EC and its move toward horror than early arrival Al Feldstein. Feldstein retired from publishing in 1984 and spent his later years concentrating on fine art painting, but he continued to give extensive interviews on his EC days until his death in 2014. As Feldstein explained to documentary filmmaker Chip Selby in 2000, it was through his encouragement that Bill Gaines became a leader in the industry instead of simply playing catch-up on the latest trends.

"We chatted about what we liked, and I told him that one of the things I was always fascinated with was the old radio horror shows: *The Witch's Tale*, *Lights Out*, *Inner Sanctum*. I remember, when I was young, climbing down the stairs while my brother was listening to these shows at midnight. So I said, 'Why don't we do gothic horror in comics? Scare the pants off the kids!'"

To help convince Gaines that his nightmarish visions would sell, Feldstein wrote and illustrated a story called "Return From the Grave" for *Cyrene Patrol* #15 (January 1950), published under the banner headline "The Crypt of Terror." Inspired by Old Nancy, a hag character who introduced each radio episode of *The Witch's Tale*, the piece was prefaced with a few comments by the Crypt Keeper, a creepy figure



in a tattered robe who boasted about the undeniably blood-chilling contents of the story. The gothic shocker "The Specter in the Castle" appeared in the next issue. It was quickly followed by a deluge of eager fan mail that proved EC's innovative take on horror was a runaway success.

Due to a loophole in the postage laws that made it cheaper for Gaines to simply reissue existing comics rather than register new titles, the seventeenth issue of *Creee Patrol* was officially rechristened *The Crypt of Terror*, and then, a few months later, *Tales From the Crypt*, leading what became known as EC's "New Trend" wave, alongside *Weird Science*, *Weird Fantasy*, *Two-Fisted Tales*, *Frontline Combat*, *Crime Suspense Stories*, *Shock Suspense Stories* and, later, the satirical *MAD* magazine.

Two other EC horror comics appeared on newsstands at this time. *War Against Crime*, which had earlier printed two horror stories from artist Johnny Craig, became *The Vault of Horror*, while *Ghostlighter* was retitled *The Haunt of Fear*. As with *The Crypt of Terror*, each of these titles was distinguished by its own unique host — the Vault Keeper and the Old Witch

joined the Crypt Keeper to make up the Ghoulardi trio, a threesome whose purpose was to balance out some of the more disturbing aspects of the stories with a steady stream of gruesome puns and graveyard humor.

With *Tales From the Crypt* and their other horror titles, Gaines and Feldstein began to dole out bimonthly doses of death and dismemberment that far exceeded even the most daring 1950s horror films, which rarely spilled even a single drop of blood.

These classic comics' bold depictions of gruesome murder, graphic torture and legions of flesh-eating ghouls would be considered kind even today, but in the emerging suburban culture of post-war North America, they were positively subversive, tearing down the carefully painted white picket fences to reveal dark dreams and desires underneath.

It's no wonder that many young readers who grew up on Walt Disney's candy-coated fantasies or the wholesome high school hijinks of Archie and Jughead became lifelong EC fans after skimming a particularly shocking story, later introducing their children and their children's children to the illicit pleasures within.

What also distinguished EC's comics — and continues to make an impression on readers today — was a final panel that featured deeply ironic commentary, whether it was a zombie who returns from the grave to avenge his death, a man who realizes he has been dead for the entire story or, in one intense case, the corrupt owner of a home for the blind forced into a maze lined with razor blades, just as the lights go out.

Feldstein was seen writing almost all of the scripts for EC, collaborating closely with Gaines, who often stayed up all night devouring pulp novels and short stories to come up with idea "springboards." Later, the two would elaborate on these basic concepts, and Feldstein would write the captions and dialogue directly on illustration boards and give them to the artists.

EC was known for encouraging individual artistic styles, and Feldstein also smartly tailored each story toward a particular artist's strengths. Originally brought in to work on western and romance titles, but later consigned to do the cover and lead stories for *The Haunt of Fear*, "Ghastly" Graham Ingels was particularly adept at undead monsters, with his dripping, nightmarish technique that seemed to ooze off the

page, while Jack Davis, who took over for Feldstein, brought a scratchy, highly detailed look to *Tales From the Crypt*.

Johnny Craig continued to anchor *The Vault of Horror* with some of EC's most graphic images — severed arms and heads, bloodstained saes, and hands bursting out of freshly dug graves, which sometimes seemed at odds with his cleanly drawn and carefully planned style.

Other house artists began to specialize in certain types of horror stories. Jack Kamen handled many of the "Grim Fairy Tales," macabre and gory stories based on fables like *Hansel and Gretel*, or ones set against a medieval backdrop that appeared in all three books.

These tales had many devoted fans who couldn't get enough of their nastiness, including Cochran.

"I have several favorites, but in one," he recalls, "the royal subjects, which had been treated with cruelty by a pompous king and queen, force live rats down their throats, sew their mouths shut, and cheer as the rats ate their way out."

It was stories like this that made EC's work so highly regarded and successful, spawning hundreds of hastily produced imitations from their competitors, none of which achieved the same lasting significance. But the sudden surge of horror comics didn't last long.

In 1964, prominent psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent* mounted an all-out attack on the comics industry, especially the bloody horror and deviant crime titles that he saw as a direct cause of juvenile delinquency. The up-roar against funny-book indecency reached its peak when a US Senate Subcommittee investigation was launched that same year, prompting Gaines to volunteer to defend *Tales From the Crypt* and his other books. After they listened to his impassioned statement, the committee members took the opportunity to grill Gaines on some of his more violent covers and stories, such as *The Hound of Fear's* infamous "Foul Play."

Feldstein later admitted to Selby in the 2000 documentary *Tales From the Crypt: From Comic Books to Television* that he felt they did go too far on occasion, as with "Foul Play," in which a baseball team uses the corpse of an opposing player who murdered their teammate as equipment, including his decapitated



head as the ball and a trail of intestines to mark the baseline.

"Yeah, we overstepped the bounds a bit on that," he said. "I think it's a natural phenomenon to try to top yourself. But there was a kind of desperation, we were doing four stories a week and we had to keep the reader interested. Yeah, it was gory, [but] today, Friday the 13th would laugh at it!"

Though nothing officially came of the hearings, in the months that followed Gaines proposed the establishment of the Comics Code Authority, an organization of comics publishers who could help clean up the industry's image. In a twist of fate almost worthy of *Tales From the Crypt*, it was this very group that ultimately led to EC's undoing, as it voted to ban the words "terror," "horror" and "crime" from comic book titles and published a Code that extolled "high standards of morality and good taste."

Forced to give up his trendsetting horror titles, Gaines angrily quit the Authority and tried a series of "New Direction" comics, which included *Acme High* and *Psychoanalysis*, but only *MAD* magazine continued to sell. The readers weren't the only ones turned off by the industry's newly watered-down stories,



though

"I gave up reading comic books after I became editor of *AMQ*," Feldstein tells *Rue Morgue*. "As a result of the Comics Code Authority's idiotic and self-castrating repression of creativity, I had no interest in their vapid contents."

But the Authority's deathblow couldn't suppress audience interest. In 1964, not even ten years after the Comics Code Authority first wiped out EC's supposedly detrimental comics, Ballantine Books became the first to reprint several *Tales From the Crypt* stories in a paperback book. Shortly thereafter, Cochran began to publish his lavish, oversized EC Portfolios. The then-professor of physics at Drake University, Cochran had developed a friendship with Gaines and Feldstein.

"One day I was in Al's office and there was a package of original art there, wrapped in brown paper," he remembers. "As I looked at it, I realized that the detail in the original drawings was considerably more than the cheap comic books were capable of reproducing. This led to my first venture as a publisher with EC Portfolio One, which featured large black-and-white reproductions of the art shot directly from these originals."

In 1978, Cochran took the next logical step and began work on *The Complete EC Library*.

"I decided it would be better to try to republish all of the EC material instead of picking and choosing my own favourites, as I had done in the Portfolios," he explains. Over the course of 28 years, he eventually reprinted every single EC issue in hardbound volumes from the black-and-white line art.

Although Gemstone Publishing acquired Ross Cochran Publishing in the mid-1990s, Cochran retained his title as publisher with Gemstone, and took on the task of recreating the original colouring jobs with the new Archive editions of *Tales From the Crypt* and the other EC titles (which have since been republished by Dark Horse Comics).

"I always wanted to reprint the EC stuff in colour," he explains. "But at the time, the technology was limited. For the Archive editions, each page is computer coloured, making sure to stick to the main themes of [EC colourist] Marie Severin's original hues, but with now-possible subtle touches."

Feldstein was equally excited about the new hard-bound series.

"From what I can see from carefully examining the first few published volumes, *The EC Archives* is going to be a full and thorough history of EC Comics, presenting the original artwork on machine-coated stock – a vast improvement over the original newspaper gaper – using the latest modern technological reproduction techniques. It is going to be the ultimate tribute to the remarkably talented writers and artists who contributed to EC's original success, and were responsible for its phenomenal popularity."

Cochran clearly hopes to bring new fans who have discovered *Tales From the Crypt* through its modern incarnations such as the movies or TV show back to the original comics. The new colour reprints enhance the original ghastly imagery and stories that had many kids carefully hiding their lurid EC titles from sneaky parents back in the 1950s. But the biggest surprise waiting for new readers is how well Bill Gaines and Al Feldstein's prophetic take on horror has held up, especially considering Gaines' initial misgivings about the comics industry in general.

"They were the best of their genre and they provide enjoyment year after year," concludes Cochran. "They are timeless."

TALES FROM THE SCREEN

MUCH OF THE CONTINUED POPULARITY OF EC COMICS HAS TO do with its film and television adaptations, which brought EC's trademark style to many viewers who would have never even considered reading the comics.

In 1972, British studio Amicus Films made *Tales From the Crypt*, a horror anthology starring Joan Collins and Peter Cushing that featured five segments based on stories from the EC horror title. The film starred venerable British stage actor Ralph Richardson as the Crypt Keeper, who tells five lost souls how they will die.

A sequel, *The House of Horror*, was released the following year with five more spooky stories. In the 1980s, the George A. Romero/Stephen King project *Creepshow*, which featured poster artwork by Jack Kamen, was also highly influenced by EC Comics' shocking, gory style.

The franchise also got a huge boost from the 1991 HBO TV series *Tales From the Crypt*, again based on EC's sinister stories.

"They captured the essence of the snap ending and the tongue-in-cheek approach that we did with all of our horror comics," Feldstein commented in 2000. "They captured our stuff pretty well and augmented it with modern cinematography and tricks. I was very pleased."

The show, hosted by a skeleton-like puppet Crypt Keeper voiced by John Kassir, was markedly different from Feldstein's original concept. Kassir, correctly-voiced Keeper has become a pop culture icon of his own, not only introducing two *Tales From the Crypt*-branded films (*Bordello of Blood* and *Green Knight*), but even appearing in Saturday morning cartoons and his own holiday CD, *Have Yourself a Scary Little Christmas*.

"Horror sells, then and now," points out director Joe Dante in the foreword to the second volume of the *Tales From the Crypt Archives*. "Obviously the success of the 1972 movie revitalized the title, and



Tales From the Crypt
HBO Series

then the HBO series kept it in the public eye for decades more. But nothing can become a classic if people can't see it, and this is where Russ Cochran and 'fan-addicts' like him come in. These throwaway comic books of nearly 60 years ago might have long ago turned to dust without the dedication and effort of those who realized their true value, and we all owe a debt of gratitude that the EC archive has been preserved so lovingly for future generations of fans."

PAUL CORUPE



FOR MOST OF US, ANY THOUGHTS OF 1950s HORROR COMIC BOOKS ARE SURE TO CONJURE THE restless spirit of the legendary EC Comics. Sixty-two years after the Comics Code Authority effectively dismantled the booming industry of horror comics (very nearly taking the entire comics business with it), William Gaines' iconic publishing house still holds a monopoly on creepy comics nostalgia – even though it only produced a scant seven percent of the joyfully gruesome fare that crowded the era's newsstands.

What about the other 93 percent, then? In the long shadow of EC, most of it has been virtually forgotten. In 2010, comics historians Greg Sadowski and John Berson hoped to change that with *Four Color Fear: Forgotten Horror Comics of the 1950s* (from Fantagraphics).

"I collected comics as a kid in the 1960s, then discovered undergrounds as a teenager in the early 1970s," Sadowski recalls. "Around that time, I became aware of EC comics and started searching for them at New York City comic conventions. The EC horror titles were what initially got me interested in the subject. Then I wondered, what about all the other companies?"

The full-colour volume reprints more than three

dozens of the very best non-EC tales, spanning a period from 1947 to 1964 (a rather loose interpretation of the decade, for sure). And while these stories owe much to EC's trend-setting style, many of them evince a glorious lack of at least one EC trademark: restraint. While EC had its writers and artists play it relatively safe in terms of graphic content, other publishers were considerably more adventurous.

"At first, the [non-EC] narrative concerned itself with largely traditional fare: ghost stories, vampires, witches and their ilk," says Peter Norment, editor of *The Mervyn Book of Best Horror Comics* and a horror comics "zine" called *From the Tomb*. "But by the latter part of 1952, until 1954, hangings, beheadings, dismemberment, flagellation, burnings, eye gouging and scenes hinting at sexual deviance were all too commonplace."

Some of these stories pack a punch even by today's jaded standards. In "Chef's Delight" (reprinted in *Four Color Fear*) from the June 1954 issue of *Story Comics'* *Mysterious Adven-*



tures #20, we get nothing less than a meat cleaver slamming into a man's head, complete with spurting crimson gore and a caption telling us that the blade "...splits his brain in half." A few panels later, the man's body is laid out on a kitchen counter, having been dismembered and cooked. (Don't worry – he totally had



(it coming.)

A few tales push the envelope even further, opting for creepy sexual innuendo over straightforward gore. In "The Body Maker," lifted from Harvey's *Black Cat Mystery* #39 (September 1952), a hideously disfigured, and therefore sexually frustrated, mad scientist sets out to make himself a woman from stolen lady parts (fresh ones — no grave-robbing for this dude). One panel finds a pair of severed legs striking a come-hither pose in a giant test tube, and in a stroke of gleefully perverse lechism, the disembodied legs are all sporting a pair of strappy heels.

It's the last story in *Four Color Fear* that is really the most transgressive, though. In "Evil Intruder," originally published in *Supernatural Journey into Fear* #12 (March 1953), a "drooling, slobbering, unthinkable monster" has an itch that only a buxom young blonde can scratch. After murdering a man and magically assuming his form, it proceeds to get it on with its victim's widow. Its approach is a little too heavy-handed, though (first-time jitters and all), and the woman protests, "Darling! N-not so rough!" As the monster is dragged back to its native nether region, it tearfully

laments the shaggy interruption: "I've had some of human love," it cries, "and I like it! I like-like it!"

Stories like this undoubtedly put a sparkle in little Johnny's eyes, but they might as well have been titled "Exhibit A" when the US Senate Subcommittee set its sights on the comics industry in 1954. While the point of *Four Color Fear* is to showcase non-EC titles, it's difficult to evaluate these stories independently of EC's wide-reaching influence.

As Sadowski points out in the extensive "Notes" section of his book, many of the publishers set out to intentionally imitate EC's product, sometimes even asking their staffers to emulate particular artists. Most of the stories employ EC's trademark ironic twist endings, and some are almost "remakes" of stories from popular titles such as *Tales From the Crypt* and *The Wolf of Menorah*.

But while they might have been derivative, these books often demonstrated a creative flair that was stifled by EC's rigid standards. For instance, while EC artists were made to adhere to a strict, standardized layout, other companies allowed their talent the freedom to do their own story breakdowns, resulting in some truly striking uses of page space.

A perfect example can be seen in "Death Deals a Hand," originally published in *Supernatural Strange Mysteries* #18 (July 1954), where playing cards (and falling bodies) tumble from panel to panel and a lithe, gun-toting femme fatale stretches across two-thirds of a page.

But before this, the horror comics heyday began innocently enough in 1947 with the release of a one-shot called *Evil Comics* from Avon Publications. Within a few years, readers would develop a nearly insatiable appetite for macabre fare. But while the publication of *Evil Comics* might have been a landmark event for horror fans, it didn't exactly open the floodgates.

"Far from it," says Norman. "Horror fans would have to wait another twelve months until the fall of 1948, when the American Comics Group released *Adventures into the Unknown*. This title is acknowledged to be the very first ongoing horror comic book series. And so would follow a deluge of fear."

Like any other pop culture phenomenon, the sudden popularity of horror comics owed much to the restlessness of the era. World War II was over, and with it,

much of the idealism that thrived in the 1940s.

Though many people – especially Americans – tend to romanticize the 1950s as a time of innocence and prosperity, the era was often a profoundly uncomfortable one for middle America. The Western world was changing rapidly and comic book publishers fought to keep up.

There were other factors at work as well, Norman points out, including the spectre of a world-shaping war.

"Returning G.I.s who had been weaned on a diet of comic books wanted more from their reading. Their desire for adult themes, with a guarantee of sex and violence, had already done much to boost sales in crime comics. The cover to *Eerie Comics* contained the kind elements they so desperately craved: a blond, scantily clad beauty about to face the peril of a depraved figure bathed in the light of a full moon. These images had become intrinsic to the sale of the pulps of the period. The comic book could allow for similar graphic displays, without the annoyance of having to trudge through all of those words. In a sense, they offered instant gratification."

By the time US Senator Estes Kefauver and his Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency introduced the wide-sweeping Comics Code in 1954, some 30 publishers had produced more than 1300 horror-themed comic books, spanning approximately 110 titles. But it was too good to last, and the end came quickly.

The words "horror," "terror," and even the innocuous "weird" and "crime" were banned from use in comic book titles. By the end of that same year, horror comics had virtually disappeared from newsstands.

Needless to say, since only 51 of the 1000-plus horror comics published in the late '40s and early '50s bore EC's logo, the task of selecting the best stories from the period to showcase in *Four Color Fear* proved a challenging one. When Sadowski and Benson began production on the book, they had some 1200 titles to track down for consideration.

The pair pored through hundreds of these books, many from their own collections and many more provided by other collectors, cherry-picking the stories they thought would best represent the output from the dozens of companies that wed with EC for a piece of the market.



Though Sadowski looked for tales that had not been reprinted as often or as recently as EC's oeuvre, fans of classic horror comics will still find themselves in familiar territory here. The stories in *Four Color Fear* boast art from the likes of Basil Wolverton, Jack Cole and Al Williamson; look closely and you'll even see the elegant lines of Frank Frazetta, who stepped in for occasional inking duties. Some of the artists featured in the volume, such as Wallace Wood, would go on to join EC's stable of talent after cutting their teeth at lesser-known companies.

Once a story was deemed suitable for the collection, it had to undergo something of a facelift. Many of the comics were originally printed (rather badly) on cheap paper, so Sadowski spruced them up a bit for publication.

"Mainly what I do is try to be faithful registration, and purify the colours as best I can, though not to the extent where it ceases to look like a comic book from the 1950s. ... Our main criteria were well-written stories, as opposed to just picking stories with great art. As it happened, most of the stories also had remarkable artwork, so that worked out well."

HAUNTED HORROR

SINCE 2012, PRE-CODE HORROR FANS HAVE BEEN TREATED TO *Haunted Horror* from Two Comics and IDW, a bi-monthly title that reprints a number of classic stories that haven't seen the light of day in years.

"IDW was very impressed with the fan and critical response to Craig Yoe's *Chilling Archives of Horror Comics* series [in publication since 2011], and asked us to produce a series of pre-code horror reprints," explains co-editor Steve Barnes.

Each issue has approximately six stories pulled from a number of sources, including issues of *Weird Terror*, *This Magazine is Haunted*, *Baffling Mysteries*, *Black Magic*, *Intique* and *Crime Detector*.

"We carefully choose which stories to use for a variety of reasons," Barnes notes. "Mostly it's about really good, eye-popping artwork, but also we try to find stories that have that certain something special to offer. It doesn't necessarily have to be a big twist ending or mazed-out gore or anything, just something with a knock-out concept that sets it apart from the usual horror stuff."

Eagle-eyed readers may notice that the above titles were not published by EC Comics, the granddaddy of pre-code horror comics. This was a deliberate choice made by Barnes and his fellow editors.

"Everyone talks about EC, and rightfully so, but we're choosing to spotlight stories from the other lesser-known artists and underground publishers of the era. There are mountains of great, overlooked and unseen work just waiting to live again. We'll also feature big names like Jack Kirby and Gene Colan who are usually associated with superheroes these days. *Haunted Horror* would like to show everyone that many of those illustrative legends often started out cutting their teeth on horror tales."

Ultimately, however, these stories are just plain fun and perfectly accomplish what good comics should: they entertain.

"If it entertains you and sends a chill or thrill up your spine," says Barnes, "then it's definitely done its job."



Cover art for *Haunted Horror* #10

COMICS CODE AUTHORITY

NO INCIDENT WAS MORE DAMAGING TO THE NORTH AMERICAN COMICS INDUSTRY

than the publication of *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. Written by psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham, the book essentially blamed comics for literacy, juvenile delinquency and even "sexual deviancy." The effects were immediate and far-reaching, placing a stranglehold on the industry that took decades to shake loose. No genre was safe, but horror comics bore the brunt of the impact.

The controversy didn't just spring from a vacuum, however. The post-World War II era was a very prosperous time for America, but also one of great inner turmoil. Americans were striving for the idealism of the nuclear family, yet there was a strong air of paranoia in the country threatening to undermine this dream. People were seeing communists on every street corner and fears about juvenile delinquency were growing, partly because of the rise of "loner" culture.

Meanwhile, comics were continuing to grow in popularity, especially among the younger crowd. While many of the titles in the late 1930s and early '40s were aimed at adults as much as kids, by the early '50s they were predominantly associated with children – possibly because of the high number of superheroes, humor and funny-animal books on the market. This didn't stop adults from

enjoying the growing number of crime and horror comics, but in the popular consciousness, comics were already a kids' medium.

Not that they necessarily needed to be to come under attack by Dr. Wertham. As early as 1948, he had launched a crusade that left no genre untouched in his fight to prove that comics were a negative influence on the minds of children.

Notably, crime and horror comics were an easy target, with their graphic depictions of murder, torture and occasional drug use. But Wertham also blamed his gaze on superheroes, claiming that Batman and Robin promoted homosexuality, and that Wonder Woman, with her strength and independence, would drive girls to a life of lesbianism. Wertham also pointed out bondage imagery in comics, as many heroes often freed themselves tied up.

Wertham peppered his book with what he claimed were real-life examples of criminal youth who admitted to reading comics – hardly surprising, considering the millions of comics on the market. Since *Seduction's* publication, it has been remarked that much of Wertham's research was exaggerated, manipulated or just plain fabricated. But at the time, his warnings were taken seriously by parents.

Things heated up even more in April 1954, when a US Senate subcommittee held a series of high-profile hearings to look for connections between comic books and



juvenile delinquency, with Wertham as a star witness. At a time when hundreds of entertainment artists were being hauled in front of Senate committees, accused of communist activities and subsequently blacklisted, the comics industry had cause to worry. They weren't being accused of communism, but the charges leveled against them were just as dangerous: subversion and the corruption of America's youth.

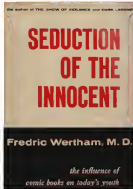
Though the committee eventually determined that comics were not to blame for juvenile delinquency, it nevertheless warned the industry to tone down its material. Deciding self-censorship was probably better than government regulation, the majority of publishers got together and formed the Comics Code Authority to screen comics for content that could be construed as objectionable. But regardless of their motives, the result was catastrophic.

"The damage was pretty significant initially," says Steve Barnes, editor of DC's *Haunted Manor*, which specializes in reprinting pre-Code horror stories. "Many of the smaller comic book publications like *Star* and *Ziff-Davis* folded overnight. Others attempted to somewhat survive and conform to these ridiculous new rules with watered-down storylines and unbecomingly tame illustrations, but found they no longer had the chops to compete with the bigger publishers like *Atlas* and *Marvel*, who employed the better writers and artists and still churned out somewhat quality material."

The Code's strict regulations included a total ban on visually gruesome, explicit acts of violence, overt sexuality or innuendo, and even supernatural monsters such as vampires, zombies and werewolves. But the Code didn't stop at banning horror tropes and imagery; publishers weren't even allowed to use the words "horror" or "terror" in their books' titles. Good guys always had to win, and bad guys always had to be punished — humanely.

"The suspense (comics) industry went from being terribly edgy and exciting, to a G-rated overdose of funny animals and westerns, and then eventually to the sanitized, Silver Age return of moral-driven crime fighters and superheroes," adds Barnes.

The Comics Code was eventually disbanded in 2011, but it took decades of industry growth and changing audience tastes for this to happen. While Japan and European countries such as France and Belgium were experimenting with the comics medium in the '50s and '60s and reaching out to mature audiences, America was deliberately wiggling away from anything that might be interpreted as subversive.



It's possible that if Wertham's witch hunt hadn't happened, comics in North America may have continued to mature, and might have been embraced by adult readers some twenty years earlier than they eventually were. Barnes has his doubts, however, and seems to think comics would have come under attack at some point, Wertham or no.

"Blaming youth behaviour on what's currently going on in pop culture seems to forever be the scapegoat excuse by people who think they know what's best for everyone," he notes. "I love talking about all the things that have ruined this great country of ours, because it's always my favorite stuff that's responsible."

And though it's easy to look back at the chaos caused by Wertham's book and just chalk it up to the naivete of the times, it should serve as a cautionary reminder that censorship is always looming over the horror genre and comics industry. In summer 2015, issue #7 of *Dark Horse's Driftwood: Drive In, Blood Out* was banned in Canada for depicting sexual content in a tawdry setting.

What's that about history repeating itself?

Fight censorship in comics? Visit the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund at cblf.org to learn how.

HE WHO
MADE A
CREATURE!

POST-CODE FALLOUT: MARVEL MONSTER BOOKS

BY 1955, THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY WAS IN FULL EFFECT AND MOST PUBLISHERS HAD TO SCRAMBLE TO adapt to the new, head-scratching rules over their output. EC Comics and similar companies, whose major output consisted of horror and crime books, effectively went out of business, while Archie Comics and DC made their already kid-friendly humor and superhero books

even more juvenile. Somewhere in the middle, there was Marvel Comics.

During the 1950s, the company that would eventually become Marvel was known as Atlas Comics, headed by publisher Martin Goodman. After the superhero craze had slowed down in the late 1940s, the company was releasing a number of titles in a variety of genres, including westerns, romances, bumbled fairy animal and adventure.

According to comics legend Stan Lee, who was a writer and editor at Atlas during that time, Goodman was keen to capitalize on whatever the popular trend was at the moment. So when the horror books of the early '50s hit, Goodman decided to follow suit and dramatically increased the company's output of horror books.

Soon, comic stands welcomed over 100 new titles, including *Amazing*, *Suspense*, *Strange Tales*,

Adventures Into Terror, *Journey Into Mystery*, *Morose* and *Discovery Tales*. These comics followed the formula perfected by EC right down to similar layouts on many of their covers. And like EC, these covers also portrayed lurid images of torture, execution, mutilation and other shocking acts of violence. Inside was the usual anthology format of short stories dealing with horrors both supernatural and man-made, and often clanking with the usual, really

bad endings.

Despite featuring talented creators such as Lee, Bill Everett, Gene Colan and Steve Ditko, Goodman's mandate that product be produced quickly and cheaply meant quality was not a priority. As a result, very few of these stories are fondly remembered, and the period in Marvel's history mostly serves as a rather stopping stone towards bigger things to come.

Ironically, it was the creation of the Comics Code Authority that helped steer Marvel to a more creative direction. With horror's taboo gone, Atlas yelped tactics once more, turning to horror's cousins, science fiction. The Code had been very specific about what topics were to be avoided,

showing many popular supernatural attractions, such as vampires, werewolves and zombies, under the ban. However, they were a bit more forgiving when it came to aliens or mad scientists.



What followed were a couple of years of even more forgettable stories, filled with alien invasions, rampaging robots and experiments gone awry. Death was rarely the outcome, and usually those threats were thwarted by the time the seventh page was reached. Luckily for Atlas, Hollywood was experiencing a boom with low-budget, B-to-B films covering many of the same topics, so the comics were able to cash in on that success. Overall, though, sales were declining.

Things were about to change for the better, though, when artist and *Captain America* co-creator Jack Kirby joined the company full-time in 1958. Kirby had freelanced for Atlas a few times over the years, but now took up permanent residence. His first story, in *Strange Worlds* #1, was a routine alien yarn called "I Discovered the Secret of the Flying Saucers." However, it was *Strange Worlds* #3 that really gave a glimpse of things to come with "I Was Face to Face with the Creature From Planet X!" Though the plot is somewhat pedestrian — in the year 2165, a woman is locked in a zoo with an alien beast — the spangly creature is a classic Kirby creation: a past, grotesque and, in this case, shaggy behemoth.

Strange Worlds only lasted two more issues, but the monster ecosystem continued in new comics such as *Tales of Astonish* and *Tales of Suspense*, as well as the existing *Journey Into Mystery* and *Strange Tales*. Additions to the bizarre menagerie included Mole-men, Diablo, Spoor, Gori-Kill, Elektro, Goom, Gograin, Klagg, Brutto, Manstrullus, Dog, Droon, Mummex, Gorgilla, Vampore, Moombay, Grotto, Gorgosa, Gregg and Drpe.

Most of these stories followed a similar pattern: hero/ine encounter monster, either on Earth or another planet; transfer pass on rampage; humans stop monster. Some of the creatures were deliberately ludicrous, while others were just upset at being defeated or displaced and in some cases gained the reader's sympathy.

Although formulaic, there's a level of creativity and fun inherent in these stories that was somewhat lacking in the earlier sci-fi tales. This is mostly due to Kirby's outstanding monster designs; his creatures were typically



fierce and bipedal, with horns, misshapen, ugly heads and oversized heads or claws adding to shock and awe factor. Monstrous, reptile or insect, fish or alien, clothed or naked — Kirby didn't discriminate, and the variety of creatures on display is one of the aspects that make this era so memorable.

Notably, some of the monsters debuting in these one-off stories would later be incorporated into the larger Marvel Universe. *Tales of Astonish* #13 featured a now-famous alien creature in "Clairke's...Broof! The Monster From Planet X!" And *Strange Tales* #52 saw the first appearance of everyone's favorite undersea-dad

and dragon, Fin Fang Foom.

But change was in the air once more. By the early 1960s, DC was garnering huge sales with new superhero comics such as *The Flash* and *Justice League of America*, prompting Lee and Kirby to create the Fantastic Four, and the rest, as they say, is history. Soon Atlas would be renamed Marvel, and would change the comics landscape forever.

It's appropriate that one of the first creature tales printed before this change was "The Man in the Ant Hill" in *Tales of Astonish* #27. A fairly lightweight version of *The Incredible Hulk*, the story features a scientist who reduces his size and must contend with a army of now-giant ants. The hero, Henry Pym, eventually finds his way back to normal, little realizing that he would make the transition from starting in a monster thriller to full-blown superhero in the near future, as the Astonishing Ant-Man.

The Marvel Monster era had come to an end... for now.

RECOMMENDED READING

Marvel Masterworks: Atlas Era: Strange Tales Volumes 1-8

Marvel Masterworks: Atlas Era: Tales of Astonish Volumes 1-4

Marvel Masterworks: Atlas Era: Tales of Suspense Volumes 1-4

Marvel Masterworks: Atlas Era: Journey Into Mystery Volumes 1-4



1960s: THE HOUSE THAT DC BUILT

DC COMICS SPENT THE MAJORITY OF THE 1960s CATERING TO THE PRE- AND EARLY-TEEN SET with superheroes, humor, romance and kooky-animal tales. But by the latter part of the decade, the company was beginning to lose ground to Marvel, whose angst-ridden heroes were striking a chord with older readers and earning them fans on college campuses throughout the country.

Not wanting to be left behind, the late '60s saw DC attempt to woo some of that market by hiring fresh talent and introducing more contemporary issues into their books. The company also decided to cautiously re-enter the horror genre.

The American social landscape had changed drastically since the foundation of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. The 1960s brought political and social unrest along with the sexual revolution, the women's movement, the youth counterculture, a new push for civil rights and a more open-minded attitude toward other art forms such as literature and cinema. And unlike the early 1950s, none of these "subversive" activities could be blamed on comic books.

It made sense, then, to revisit some of the Code's guidelines and make an appeal for looser restrictions,

especially where horror themes were concerned. While discussions were taking place, DC took the plunge and hired former EC Comics staffer Joe Orlando to revamp its *House of Mystery* title—a notable starting point for the company's new horror vein.

House of Mystery had originated as a horror book back in 1951. Like many titles, though, it switched its emphasis in the mid-'50s to science fiction and monster stories, along with the odd, watered-down occult tale, after the implementation of the Code. In the mid-'60s it was refocused yet again into a superheroes book, showcasing *J'onn J'onzz*, the Martian Manhunter, and launching the Dual "H" for Hero series. It was time to return the comic to its horror roots.



The new version of *House of Mystery* debuted in early 1968 with issue #174. The return was heralded by a snazzy new logo and a fantastic cover depicting a shadowy figure beckoning to a group of hesitant children from behind a pair of large, wooden castle doors. It's as if the entire horror comics genre was quickly firing to a new generation of readers who had been deprived of

its pleasures. It's a fantastic metaphor, and no doubt the reason why so many of the title's covers would feature kids spying on, or participating in, horrific tableaux.



Unfortunately, behind the evocative cover lay a series of rather unimpressive reprints of post-Code stories from sister publication *House of Secrets*. Readers would have to wait until issue #175 for a better glimpse into Orlando's vision for the book.

Orlando had worked on Warren Publishing's *Creepy Magazine*, both as an artist and as a story editor, and he brought his experience on that horror anthology with him to DC. Recognizing the need for a strong book, he collaborated with writer Bob Haney and artist Jack Sparling to create a suitable *House of Mystery* host. The result was Cain, "the Able Corp-Taker," reportedly modelled on writer Lon Klin (though presumably with a more severe hairstyle). Cain was somewhat more welcoming than horror anthology narrators such as EC's Crypt-Keeper and the Old Witch, but he retained the dark corner of humor that had become a horror host trademark. He would also often make additional appearances throughout a story instead of just providing narrative bookends.

Cain debuted in #175, along with a concept that would rise to head on a regular basis for the duration of the title. In the tale "The House of Gargoyles," he tells of an occurrence that once took place in the House of Mystery,

making the spooky setting itself an integral part of the narrative. It was a clever way of distinguishing the book from previous anthologies as well as viewing Cain as an active participant in many of the stories.

House of Mystery quickly established itself as a worthy successor to the many horror titles of the '50s. Although not as graphic or violent as those books, *Mystery* more than made up for its lack of capitalistic elements with imaginative and well-written stories that frequently surpassed its predecessors in quality and diversity.

While plenty of stories still dealt with monsters, ghosts and nasty people getting their well-deserved — though less explicit — supernatural comeuppance, it was well unusual for the title to experiment with more thought-provoking tales, such as #186's "Nightmare" by Jack Black and Neal Adams, in which a lonely young girl is tempted by a statue of the god Pan come to life, to join him in his garden for eternity. The girl eventually hands her father's claims that it's all a dream and turns her back on her playmate, acknowledging that it's just a piece of stone. The final panel, a close-up of the statue crying, is both haunting and poignant — a far cry from the typical twist-ending "gotchas" that had been a staple of the format.

One of the book's strengths, and a main reason for its high quality, was the roster of new talent that routinely filled its pages. Like many anthologies, it became a proving ground for up-and-coming writers and artists, with creators such as Mary Wollman, Len Wein and Gerry Conway penning many of their first stories under its banner.

Joining the writers was an equally impressive lineup of artists, including Neal Adams, Bernie Wrightson (who made his professional comic debut in #179's tale "The Man Who Murdered Himself"), Gil Kane, Jim Aparo and Alex Toth. Unlike the usual static layouts of 1950s comics, many of these artists experimented with full- and double-page spreads, elaborate shading and unconventional panels, the likes of which had rarely been seen in comics since the 1940s.

House of Mystery proved to be a big hit for DC, leading



House of Mystery
PITS



to the renewal of *House of Secrets* in 1969 to act as a subbing publication. Like *Mystery*, *Secrets* had debuted years before—in 1966, to be exact—after the establishment of the Comics Code. It ran the usual weak thriller, suspense and science-fiction tales before experimenting with adult superheroes such as Mark Merlin and Prince Ra-Man, ending its original run with issue #160 in 1968.

The new *House of Secrets* launched in spring 1969, continuing the numbering with issue #51. Like *Mystery*, this series would also have a host—the bumbling Abel, brother to Cain. Abel was created by Mark Hamerfeld, Bill Draut and Joe Orlando as a more positive, less sinister host than his brother, prone to addressing an off-panel character named Galtie who, like the reader, serves as the audience for his stories.

And like the *House of Mystery*, the sparsely star of *Secrets* also served as a character in many of the early stories, displaying the odd habit of physically moving its location until finally settling in across the way from Cain's shack. Many of the talents behind *Mystery* also served time in *House of Secrets*, resulting in two series very close in style and quality—right down to those pesky kids on the covers.

Yet despite the Code relaxing some of its rules, DC creators still found themselves regularly challenged, sometimes for the most ridiculous reasons. *House of Secrets* #83's "The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of" is introduced by Abel as a story told to him by "a wandering waltman." This is a subtle in-joke referring to the story's writer, Mort Wolfman. Unfortunately, the CCA took it literally and rejected the story on the grounds that any reference to a



"waltman," along with nods to vampires and zombies, was a violation of the Code. Conway had to agree to clarify the joke to readers by crediting Wolfman as the writer on the story's splash page, along with artist Alex Toth. It was the first time creator credits were listed in a DC horror anthology.

In 1971, the Code finally dropped its ban on waltmen, vampires and other supernatural boudies. While Marvel moved to capitalize on Code relaxers by launching numerous series starring horror characters, DC continued to build on its great success with anthology titles. Soon other books such as *The Misting Hour*, *Ghost and Weird* and *Mystery Tales* joined the ranks and would serve as DC's primary horror offerings throughout the decade.

Most enjoyed a modicum of success, though none outlasted *House of Mystery*, which finally shuttered its doors in 1963 with #321. (*House of Secrets* had been absorbed into another DC series, *The Unexpected*, which ended in 1962.) Even then, Cain and Abel would make regular appearances in Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*, and both Rosses would be resurrected as regular series for Vertigo in the 2000s.

UNKHOLY HOSTS

HOUSE OF MYSTERY AND HOUSE OF SECRETS RE-

main the best-known of DC's horror anthology output, but they weren't the only DC books whose hosts dared readers to peek between the covers.

THE WITCHING HOUR

The Witching Hour is hosted by three weird witches named Mordak, Malind and Oyethia, who bear a striking resemblance to the sisters in *Macbeth*. Like Ome and Abel, the sisters would become important characters in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* two decades later.

GHOSTS

Possibly the weakest of DC's anthology lineup, perhaps due to the requirement that each tale involve spectral participation of some sort, it doesn't help that the book lacks a regular host to help the reader get in the mood. Ten years after its debut, it finally gained a recurring character with Spirit Shade, an invisible specter clad in a white suit and cape, spectacles and top hat. Audiences were clearly unimpressed; the book was cancelled nine issues later with #152.

SECRETS OF SINISTER HOUSE

Starting like an *The Sister House of Secret Love*, this gothic romance/horror mashup was retrained with the fifth issue and gained a host, Eve, cousin to Cain and Abel. Perhaps sensing the property would soon be condensed, Eve jumped ship with #16 (going with editor Joe Orlando), and the book ended its short run with #18.

WEIRD MYSTERY TALES

Originally hosted by the lovely and loathed Dearly until Eve came along looking for a new job after bailing on *Sinister House*, Eve wormed her way into the book, becoming sole hostess with #15. *Weird Mystery Tales* came to an end after only 24 issues, but Eve must have struck a chord with Gaiman — she went on to become a major part of the *Dreaming* in *Sandman*.



SECRETS OF HAUNTED HOUSE

We doubt annoyed by Eve's intrusion into *Weird Mystery Tales*, Dearly took over as this book's sole host starting with the tenth issue. The title lasted almost twice as long as *Mystery Tales*, giving Dearly slightly more bragging rights at family reunions.

TALES OF GHOST CASTLE

Folding after a mere three issues, *Tales of Ghost Castle's* lasting contribution is the host character of Lucien, the guardian of an abandoned castle in Transylvania and keeper of its vast library. Lucien would be yet another character re-purposed by Gaiman for *Sandman*.

THE UNEXPECTED

Ironically, raves at the unexpected, the series was re-branded with #106, much like *House of Mystery* and *House of Secrets*. *The Unexpected* would have a sporadic host during its run: the Mad Mad Witch. In 1979, with the cancellation of both *House of Secrets* and *The Witching Hour*, the two series and their hosts were merged with *The Unexpected* until it ended in 1982 with #222. (And if you're wondering, yes, the Mad Mad Witch makes an appearance in *Sandman*.)

FORBIDDEN TALES OF DARK MANSION

Written by screenwriter Chasly, this book originally focused on gothic romance but later broadened its scope and its cancellation with #15. Chasly was sadly ignored by Gaiman in later years, instead playing a role in James Robinson's *Starman*.

RECOMMENDED READING

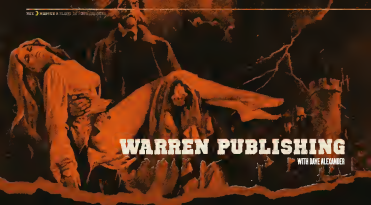
Showcase Presents *House of Mystery* Volumes 1-3

Showcase Presents *House of Secrets* Volumes 1-3

Showcase Presents *The Witching Hour* Volume 1

Showcase Presents *Ghosts* Volume 1

Showcase Presents *The Secrets of Sinister House* Volume 1



WARREN PUBLISHING

WITH DAN ALEXANDER

WHEN CREEPY MAGAZINE CRAWLED ONTO NEWSSTANDS BACK IN 1964, IT FILLED THE gaping hole left by the Comics Code Authority's castration of the comics industry. For nearly a decade, horror fans had seen their beloved, grisly horror comics either disappear or get watered down to an unrecognizable level. Little did they know that a legal loophole in the formation of the Code would provide the means for eventual relief.

When EC publisher Bill Gaines was forced to make radical changes to his company's output in the wake of the Code, he decided to change his horror book *Mad* to a larger, black-and-white magazine to escape the censors (public persecution had convinced him to give up horror altogether). It turns out the Comics Code only had jurisdiction over actual comics, and not other publications such as newspapers or magazines. While it would appear other publishers were hesitant to use this shortcut to get back into the horror business, the baton was finally taken up by Jim Warren, who successfully used the same loophole to reintroduce

horror comics to newsstands.

Warren was a struggling publisher in the 1950s, initially trying to emulate Hugh Hefner's success with *Playboy* by launching his own adult magazine, *After Hours*. That only lasted four issues and by all accounts was a disaster that also landed Warren in jail on charges of obscenity and pornography.

One good thing came out of *After Hours*, however: Warren met writer and horror fanatic Forrest J Ackerman, who had submitted a pictorial feature called "Girls From Science-Fiction Movies" to the publication. The two kept in touch, and it was Ackerman who convinced Warren to publish a magazine focusing on horror and monsters — and so, *Famous Monsters of Filmland* was birthed in 1956.

Famous Monsters was a tremendous success, and allowed Warren to found (and fund) Warren Publishing. It also drew home the commercial appeal of monster horror, especially to kids

who were now being reeled in by classic Universal horror films on television (and probably snaking into theatres to see the gonzo Hammer Film offerings).



THE NEW CREEP IN TOWN

CREEPY'S INITIAL RUN ENDED IN 1985, BUT DARK HORSE PICKED

up the brand in 2006 when it entered a relationship with new owners New Comic Company to publish lavish hardcover reprints of both *Creepy* and *Eerie*. The success of those volumes prompted the company to relaunch *Creepy* as a quarterly comic in 2009.

"*Creepy* falls into kind of a sweet spot for Dark Horse, since we've long been associated with horror comics," says Brendan Wright, editor at Dark Horse. "So it was natural to build a relationship with New Comic Company, the owners of *Creepy* and *Eerie*. Our deal with them encompasses archival editions of the original material in order and artist-specific collections, and it was natural to launch a new *Creepy* series to go with them, both to bring extra attention to the reprints but also to introduce classic-style anthology horror to a new audience and see what we could bring to the *Creepy* brand."

Like its predecessor, Dark Horse's *Creepy* is a black-and-white anthology book, hosted by the irreplaceable Uncle Creep and featuring top industry talents, both new and old. In 2014, to mark the brand's 50th anniversary, Dark Horse celebrated with a special extra-length issue, crisscrossed with devilish delights (*Creepy* #10). For Dark Horse, commemorating *Creepy*'s vibrant anniversary was important, given the publication's legacy within horror history.

"*Creepy* is important for the simple fact that it led

the charge in bringing horror back to comics after the Comics Code ran EC Comics out of the field," explains Wright. "That's a huge accomplishment in itself. And of course, it's been good comics. Those original stories are still a great read, and they pop up in unexpected places from time to time, like the story 'Jennifer' [from 1974's *Creepy* #63] becoming the basis for an episode of *Masters of Horror* directed by David Aronoff."



Creep also fostered a generation of writers and artists who continue to do great work, like Richard Corben, Bernie Wrightson, Bruce Jones, Angelo Torres, Sanjivini, Doug Moench and a lot of good peeps."

Yet despite its reverence for the past, Dark Horse is determined to push *Creepy* forward, utilizing conventions new to the industry to ensure that the brand continues for another 50 years.

"In much the way that *Creepy* itself represented the '60s' and '70s' answer to those original EC comics, I'd like to think that we've brought the flavor of the moment to *Creepy* while still honoring the series' history," says Wright. "Comics take so many more forms now that we've also had the opportunity to bring in influences that didn't exist during the original run, from webcomics artists like Matt Nelson to webcomic artists like Emily Carroll. These have run alongside contributions from staples in a more traditional vein, and even some by artists from the original run, from webcomics artists like Matt Nelson to webcomic artists like Emily Carroll. These have run alongside contributions from staples in a more traditional vein, and even some by artists from the original run, from webcomics artists like Matt Nelson to webcomic artists like Emily Carroll."

original *Creepy*. That kind of mix of elements is what I love about anthologies, and I think it's kept our series from feeling like a retread while still being familiar to long-time fans."

AXES AND EYEBALLS: THE WEIRD WORLD OF EERIE PUBLICATIONS

BY APOL SKELLINGS

HORROR COMICS BEFORE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY MIGHT HAVE been gaudy, but Eerie Publications went over the top. The weird magazines, which hit their stride in the 1960s and '70s, mostly consisted of stories that were simply redrawn versions of previously published horror comics, but with one important innovation: gore by the gallon. Not to be confused with James Warren's admittedly classier *Creepy* and *Eerie* magazines, Eerie Publications titles such as *Tales From the Tomb* and *Wield* lured readers in with graphic depictions of violent death and dismemberment—not to mention some top-notch art by creators who had nearly been put out of business by the Code.

Since Eerie's output technically fell into the magazine category, it skirted the restrictions of the Code altogether. Verbal abuse could be punned twirling from mangled neck stumps ("House of Monsters" from the January 1970 issue of *Horror Tales*) and bodies were torn apart until nothing was left but "an unrecognizable heap of mutilated flesh and crushed bones lying in a massive pool of blood" ("Voodoo Terror" from *Terror Tales*, July 1976).

"Violent horror was coming of age at the time, and the Eerie Pubs magazines were among the trailblazers," says Mike Hawlett, author of *The Weird World of Eerie Publications: Comic Gore that Waged Millions of Years* (Mondo/Feral House, 2010). "They were the bad boys of comics, much like H.G. Lewis and George Romero were

the opposites of Hollywood at the time, breaking the gore taboo."

Eerie Publications developed a winning, if not exactly ethical, formula: pick a story from one of the hundreds of pre-Code horror comics (preferably not EC—too high-profile), photocopy it and hand it off to an artist to produce a much gorier version. And not just any artist; Eerie hired top talent such as Dick Ayers and Chic Stone to raise the gore quotient for its "remakes."

Many of these artists had lost a lot of income due to the devastating effects of the Comics Code of 1954, so they ultimately welcomed the work—even if they were initially uncomfortable with the material.

Ayers, for instance, rejected Eerie's offer at first. During an interview with *Rise Morgue* in 2010, the artist laughed when he recalled his first meeting with Eerie editor Carl Burgos, who worked under the auspices of an umbrella company known as Countrywide Publications.

"When he showed me what he wanted me to do—to really make those stories horrible, with [body parts] flying through the air better-shelter—I said, no, I wouldn't do that. Marvel had me doing horror stories, but [what Burgos wanted] was just too much. So he took me into the office of Myron Fass, who was the publisher. Myron sat back and he listened to me say, 'Oh, no, I won't do that, I don't want to go that far.' And he said, 'Look, before you make up your mind, go to the movies tonight and see the one called *The Wild Bunch*.' So I went to see it with my wife, and I came back





and said, "Hey, if they can do that in the movies, I can do it in a comic book."

It wasn't long before Ayers was producing some of the most grisly comic art the world had ever seen. He even developed his own trademark Fazio-esque gag: whenever one of Ayers' characters was on the business end of an axe, you could bet that at least one eyeball would come popping out.

"It developed naturally," the artist says. "It just seems like the logical thing to do, to have someone's eyes pop out when they're getting all cut up."

Besides their gore-zo art, the stories also received kind new titles. "I Killed Mary" from Gilliam's *Witch Myrtles* #8 (1954) was retitled "I Chopped Her Head Off" when Ayers redrew it for a 1975 issue of *Weird*. *Eerie* did publish a few original stories, as well—most notably "Bled Ruth," Chic Stone's gruesome cautionary tale about the dangers of LSD, which apparently caused its users to roll severed body parts to the nearest wall. Ayers was happy to have the gag and had no qualms about reworking the stories.

"I never gave that a thought. That was Myers's problem, not mine. I liked them better with the titles they picked anyway."

For Howlett, like most *Eerie* Pubco collectors, the gorzo art is what initially attracted him to the magazine. The

full-color covers (interiors were always black and white) were eye-catching: notable images include a woman being fed alive into a sausage grinder, a giant monster gnawing a woman's flesh from her bones, cone-on-the-cob style, and Frankenstein's monster using his own severed arm to pound a stake into a vampire's chest.

"When I saw Chic Stone's cover for the May 1969 issue of *Weird*, I was floored," Howlett says. "It blew my mind and started a multi-decade obsession. The fact that nothing was known about the people involved with *Eerie* was another thing that lit my fire.... Who the hell would publish this outrageous shit?"

The answer is the aforementioned Fass, Countrywide's prolific and controversial publisher. Horror magazines such as *Tales of Madness* and *Terrors of Disquiet* were only a fraction of Fass' pulp empire. His New York offices published a huge body of work that covered practically every pop culture touchstone of the era. Magazines such as *Jaws of Blood* and *Glow Encounters of the Fourth Kind* rode the coattails of blockbuster movies, while other releases included rock music-inspired *Thugs Acid Rock* and *Paul McCartney Dead—The Great Hoax*, and a number of men's magazines such as *Rush-Rush News*.

Remembered for his colorful personality as much as for his work, Fass often confronted editors with a loaded gun strapped to his side, and supposedly once dealt with a business disagreement by beating one of his associates in front of the rest of his employees. At one point, Fass even took on famed horror publisher James Warren in a high-stakes, if less than spectacular, duel.

Both even wanted to publish a magazine called *Eerie*, so it was decided that whoever delivered the mag first would get the title. Both publishers were forced into frantic, all-night production sessions with their respective teams. Warren was, so Fass had to rewire his hastily produced magazine. In fact, you can still see unerasred pencil marks on the cover of the January 1969 issue of *Weird*—the first title published under the banner of *Eerie Publications* (the name clearly a jab at Warren).

"I admire Fass for what he accomplished, but not necessarily how he accomplished it," says Howlett. "Honestly, when I think of him, I think of a tyrannical, egotistical, boorish man whose quirks and intentions left a bit to be desired. But he taught so many young kids the ins and outs of the business, and he gave many people in the publishing industry their start. His magazines influenced many artists, writers, actors and other creative people with tastes that ran just a bit left of center. Even we well-does need an outlet."

TOP FIVE EERIEST DEATHS

'I CHOPPED HER HEAD OFF'

Meek Frank is spurned by the object of his affection, Susan. What's a boy to do, but chop her up into tiny pieces? Bloody body parts are proudly on display throughout the story, even well after the heinous deed is done, as Frank continues to picture Susan's dismembered corpse, even while sitting down for the family meal. Yuck!

'THE CLAW'

surgeon Dr. Mearns is strangled to death by the covered, skeletal, claw-like hand of the rival physician he murdered. The hand chokes the life out of him and we're treated to a close-up of Martin's face gushing blood and his eyeballs popping out. He wanted to get ahead in his career, until he found it to be too much of a handful.

'FOOD FOR GHOULS'

Despicable world-renowned chef Francois lives in the lap of luxury while his neglected wife, Marie, and son are forced to mallow in squalor. When his son dies of appendicitis after he refuses to pay for medical treatment, his wife decides to enact a tasty revenge. Francois gets a meat cleaver to the head and is then chopped up and used as the main ingredient in Marie's celebratory feast. Francois' Famous Fried Brains, anyone?

'GREEN HORROR'

Martha's new plant, a full-grown cactus she acquired in Mexico, is green with envy of her husband — so it picks up the nearest axe and hurls it at the back of his head in a memorable act of brain-spitting, blood-spurting, eye-popping action. When Martha gets a new beau, the plant does away with him too, cutting his face open with its spines, choking the life out of him and ripping his arm off

for good measure. Eventually, it decides enough is enough and puts the squeeze on Martha, simultaneously stabbing and crushing her to death. Moral: a girl's best plant is a rhododendron.

'THE SKIN-RIPPERS'

Pat and Lorna's honeymoon is no picnic as the couple is stranded on an island and soon discover it's infested by plant stalks. In the story's most memorable scene (pictured below), Lorna is eaten alive by a swarm of theavenous creatures (giving readers a scream-by-scream description of the experience), while Pat watches helplessly as his wife is reduced to a clean pile of bones. If only they'd thought to pack a can of Raid for their trip.

*All stories are collected in *The Worst of Erle* Publications, published by Joe Banks/DW.



The Skin-Rippers



MELVIN MONSTER

BY PAUL GRUPE

JUST BECAUSE OLDER KIDS IN THE MID 1960s COULD DELVE INTO SPOOKY HORROR COMICS such as *Creechy* and *Walt Korb's Tales of Mystery* doesn't mean they got to have all the fun. Lurking on a rarely accessible newsstand shelf, Dell Comics' *Melvin Monster* may have been intended for youngsters, but its relentless warmth and wit—not to mention its spooky twists—place it among the best horror comics of its time.

Originally created by revered artist and writer John Stanley in 1965, the online nine-issue run of *Melvin Monster* was re-released in 2011 as part of *Drew & Quarterly's* John Stanley Library.

"By the time *Melvin* came along, the 1960s monster craze was already in full swing," notes cartoonist and comics historian Seth, who designed *Drew & Quarterly's* handsome *Melvin Monster* books. "The Shock Theater package of old horror films for TV created a whole generation of kids who were soliciting for more monster material. Famous Monsters of Filmland had been out for at least six years and *The Addams Family* TV show had been around for about a year. *Melvin* seemed perfectly crafted to get those monster kids' dimes—well, he's a cert! actually."

Melvin Monster is overflowing with slapstick gags and ghastly monster puns. Stanley, who also drew kids' comics like *Lilo* and *Nancy*, casts *Melvin* as a speakoast

reflection of his mischievous peers, a happy, green-skinned youngster whose pleasant behavior frustrates his cranky parents, Murray and Buddy. When *Melvin*'s not being harassed by his witchy neighbor, Little Horra, or avoiding his hungry pet alligator Cleopatra, he's usually down at the schoolhouse, trying unsuccessfully to enroll in the empty school run by Miss McDargyle.

"The codes of behavior in *Monsterville* are upside down, much like the Bizarro world in *Superman* (jokes!)—polite behavior is seen as rude, meanness is niceness, and it's the humans who are the monsters," observes Seth, who became a fan of the title after finding some old issues languishing in the bins at comic book conventions. "The surprising thing is that it's a wonderfully funny and sweet comic book. John Stanley was such a good writer that no matter what he turned his hands to, it came out great."

Aside from allowing Stanley to indulge in spine-chilling accoutrements such as basement-dwelling monsters and clawed hands emerging from panels, *Monsterville's* unique character grants him a freedom unseen in his conventional titles. *Melvin* runs along the ceiling and hides in the stove when one of his monstrous relatives comes over for a visit, while his Frankenstein-like father frequently smashes holes in the walls and floors of their haunted house. Most stories begin with Stanley introducing a gag and then building





on it until it reaches absurd, physics-defying proportions, giving Melzer an off-the-wall flavor that wouldn't be too out of place in *Mad Magazine*.

"These stories are actually funny, to both kids and adults," notes Seth, who's also known for his illustrated covers for *The New Yorker* and *Christian Collection DVD*. "Stanley seemed to be primarily trying to amuse himself, and that likely made him a better writer than most of his peers. Stanley's work doesn't talk down to the reader, it's smart. His comics are that rare pop culture treasure — top-quality junk that transcends its shoddy origins. It's also to try to give a bit of respect to artists like Stanley — guys who would have never expected it."

But while the creepy content and pop culture significance of these *Melvin Monster* collections make them attractive to older fans, Seth hopes that Stanley's spooky, warped world of *Monsterville* will make its biggest impression on those it was originally created for: kids with a budding love of horror.

"I deliberately packaged the books to feel like a tiny library of hardcover children's books," notes Seth. "I want kids to read this stuff and fall in love with it. I want them to grow up and pass it along to their kids as well."

STANLEY AND HIS MONSTER

IN LATE 1965 — THE SAME YEAR THAT MELVIN MONSTER MADE HIS DEBUT at Dell — DC Comics also decided to explore its humorous side of horror with the premiere of *Stanley and His Monster* as a backup in the funny-animal title *The Fox and the Crow* #93. Stanley, a six-year-old boy, finds a monster in the sewer — a large, pink-furred, lanky behemoth who is terribly frightened of the human world that surrounds him. Naming him Spot, Stanley takes the creature home and opens the door to a series of misadventures.

Created by writer Arnold Drake (*Deadman*) and artist Winslow Mortimer, *Stanley and His Monster* became a hit with readers and eventually took over the book with #100. Along with various comedic scenarios arising from Stanley's efforts to hide and protect Spot from the world at large, the duo also run afoul of the lecherous Shaggygory Pelton, Schnitzel the gremlin, the ghost of Napoleon, and, most terrifying of all, Marla, the teenage babysitter. The comic shared the same whimsical tone that would later characterize strips such as *Calvin and Hobbes* — an exaggerated yet endearing view of childhood with heaping doses of fantasy.

The book ended with #112 but the characters were revisited in 1993 in an excellent four-issue limited series by Phil Foglio. Here it is revealed that Spot was actually kicked out of Hell by Lucifer himself for the crime of being "too nice." It's a perfect homage to the original series that also manages to poke some fun at Vertigo's trend of taking DC Silver Age horror characters and re-imagining them for a mature audience.





1960s: DELL/GOLD KEY

THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY HAD PLACED A STRANGLEHOLD ON MUCH OF THE INDUSTRY, BUT THERE WAS a handful of companies that refused to bow to their demands. Among them was Dell Comics, a division of Dell Publishing, which had started out producing pulp magazines in the 1930s.

In 1938, Dell partnered in with Western Publishing and for the next couple of decades they would release comics based on a number of popular licenses, including properties from Warner Brothers, Hanna-Barbera, and Walt Disney Productions. By the time Western's *Seduction of the Innocent* began to make waves, Dell was firmly ensconced in the children's comic book market, with its family-friendly titles accounting for nearly a third of overall comics sales.

So in 1964, confident that its relatively tame output could avoid the controversy whipped up by Wertheim's book, Dell declined membership in the Comics Code Authority. Instead, they published a "Pledge to Parents" in their books, promising to "sanitize entirely, rather than regulate, objectionable material" and proudly proclaiming that "Dell Comics

Are Good Comics." Despite this freedom from outside regulation, however, Dell and Western decided to mostly avoid horror-related content — though, luckily for horror fans, there were some exceptions.

Dell and Western ended their partnership in 1962, which led to Western starting its own comics imprint,

Gold Key. Continuing to license popular television and movie properties, Gold Key released a comic book version of the TV anthology series *Boris Karloff Thriller*, to capitalize on the show and, more importantly, Karloff's popularity. The actor's likeness appeared on the covers as well as inside the books, where he introduced each tale, much as he did on television.

Gold Key's publishing schedule was erratic, to put it mildly, and only two issues of *Boris Karloff Thriller* were released while the television series was on the air. But the comic ultimately proved more successful than its book-



tube counterpart, and so it continued under a new title, *Boris Karloff Tales of Mystery*. The rechristened series lasted until 1980 — more than a decade after Karloff's death in 1969 — before fading into comics obscurity after an impressive 97 issues.

Though nowhere near as graphic as the horror comics of the previous decade or as progressive as the works of the late 1960s, the book nevertheless offered some relief to readers who craved something more macabre than superheroes and funny animals. The stories may be light on blood, but by stressing other elements such as plot, mystery and suspense, they actually hold up much better than many of the more sensational comics of the 1950s – not surprising given the number of talented people who worked on the title over the years, including industry veterans Alex Toth, Joe Orlando, Mike Sekowsky, Frank Thomas, José Luis García-López, Arnold Drake, Lyle Wiser, Al Williamson, Jerry Robinson and Don Spriegel.

Fans of the gruesome can still take heart, however: Most of the stories deal with the supernatural and the bizarre, including tales of evil sorcerers, cursed artifacts, vengeful spirits and the odd sea monster or alien. And to set the mood, each issue has a gorgeously painted cover, usually stressing the more macabre elements within.

Gold Key also released a comic version of *The Twilight Zone*. This book, which launched in 1962, was even tamer than the Kerolt material, opting for more traditional science-fiction tales rather than horror. It still made occasional forays into the weird, however, and didn't hesitate to throw in some ghoul-monsters and even a vampire or two. The series was popular enough that it lasted until 1982.

It wasn't until 1968 that Gold Key debuted a pure horror book, *Dark Shadows*, based on the daytime television soap opera that was then at its height of popularity. The program remains one of the few (and easily the best) daytime dramas with a horror focus, and it capitalized on its reputation with storylines dealing with the occult, ghosts, various creatures and even time travel. At the centre of the show was Barnabas Collins, a 200-year-old, guill-ridden vampire who terrorized – and romanced – the female populace of the fictional town of Collingwood, Maine. It was perfect fodder for comic books.

By 1968, the Comics Code was becoming a bit more flexible, but it still refused to condone any comic featuring vampirism, let alone werewolves and zombies, which made releasing a book starring a vampire somewhat difficult. As a result, DC and Marvel passed up the publishing rights. But Gold Key was able to pick



up the licence for *Dark Shadows* and slip it right under the Code's nose.

The scripts by writers Arnold Drake and Donald J. Arneson feature their fair share of bloodsuckers, werewolves, ghosts, ghouls, mummies and zombies busily battling each other, but they didn't hesitate to wax philosophical, especially when dealing with Barnabas Collins' condition. Like *The Twilight Zone* and *Boris Karloff*, *Dark Shadows* outlasted its source material, coming to an end in 1975.

Dell, meanwhile, all but grewed horror after the split with Western in favour of properties such as *Mission: Impossible* and *Doctor Kidder*. The company made a brief foray into monster country in 1966, when it decided to recreate Dracula, Frankenstein and the generically named Werewolf (the "Wolf Man" being trademarked by Universal) as costumed superheroes, and gave each character its own book. The series was met with critical ridicule and anemic sales; they were all cancelled after three issues.

Dell Comics eventually shuttered in 1973, unable to compete with the quality and popularity of books being published by DC and Marvel. Gold Key lasted only a few years longer before it ceased publication in 1984. While it's easy to dismiss the output from both companies as slight and juvenile, they nevertheless offer a fascinating glimpse into the world of horror comics in the post-Code wilderness years.

RECOMMENDED READING

Boris Karloff: Tales of Mystery Archives Volumes 1-6
Dark Horse

Dark Shadows: The Complete Series Monthly 1-6
Himmer Press

1970s: MARVEL MONSTER HORROR

MARVEL COMICS SPENT THE MAJORITY OF THE 1960s ESTABLISHING AND BUILDING

their superhero universe, with little time devoted to other genres, including horror. To be fair, this had less to do with lack of interest on Marvel's part and more with the constraints placed upon it by distributor Independent News Company, which was an offshoot of National Periodical Publications — the parent company of DC Comics. To struggle competition, Independent would only allow Marvel to distribute eight to twelve books per month, and since superheroes were racking up sales, it made sense for the company to focus on sure-sellers.

But by 1969, Marvel had enough sales power to break away from Independent, and began to substantially expand its book range. It started exploring possibilities in other genres, including horror. Marvel had enjoyed some success in 1963 with the character of Doctor Strange, a sorcerer who often clashed with occult forces and black magic. However, Strange tended to do battle with nebulous beings inhabiting psychedelic dimensions, as opposed to traditional horror figures. With the Comics Code Authority slowly relaxing its

grip, Marvel felt it was time to once again dip its toe into terrifying territory.

Though not every book was a runaway success, each of the following characters left a mark on Marvel's legacy. Like true horror icons, they have all refused to stay dead, enjoying many resurrections over the last few decades.

MORBIUS, THE LIVING VAMPIRE

In early 1971, the CCA lifted its ban on vampires and other supernatural creatures, making way for the debut of Morbius, the Living Vampire in



Amazing Spider-Man #101. Created by writer Roy Thomas and artist Gil Kane, Morbius was originally meant to be Oscula himself until, according to Thomas, Stan Lee voiced the idea, opting for a costumed villain instead.

Though technically a vampire, Morbius came by his condition through scientific, rather than supernatural, means. A biochemist with a rare and fatal blood disease, Michael Morbius experimented on himself in search of a cure and soon found himself transformed into a white-skinned monstrosity, needing human blood to survive. Morbius followed the pattern established by vampire such as Barnabas Collins — he was

a tragic and sympathetic figure, reluctantly feeding his addiction while seeking a cure.

Morbus proved popular enough to be given his own feature in *Adventure into Fear*, though it only lasted twelve issues. He made sporadic appearances around the Marvel Universe throughout the rest of the decade, but was never as big a seller as Dracula himself. Nevertheless, Morbus proved readers had an appetite for monsters.

DRACULA

Marvel's next vampire character was none other than the top bloodsucker himself, debuting in *Tomb of Dracula* #1. Though the series flourished somewhat until writer Mary Worthington took over in issue #17, Marvel made a handful of smart decisions from the get-go. First, the writers would not adapt Stoker's novel, opting instead to tell original stories. Second, Dracula would be resurrected into



contemporary times. Third, the vampire would remain a villain – the target of a group of vampire hunters led by the descendants of Jonathan Harker and Dr Van Helsing. Though he displayed some sympathetic traits, such as mourning the death of his wife, Dracula would be the antagonist throughout the series, and had no qualms about killing those who sought to destroy him.

Artist Gene Colan reportedly based Dracula's likeness on actor Jack Palance, though for the majority of the series the character is more creature than man, with an elongated face, red eyes, exaggerated fangs and pointed ears. Colan's art is arguably the strongest aspect of the book, atmospheric and genuinely frightening, it's possibly the high point of the artist's career.

Though *Tomb of Dracula* ended with issue #70, the character lived on due to yet another smart decision made early on by the creative team: to incorporate the title into the larger Marvel Universe. Dracula clashed

with Spider-Man and Doctor Strange, and would later encounter the X-Men in their book. This also opened the door for other characters introduced in the series to continue after its demise – most notably Blade, the vampire hunter who is also cursed with vampirism.

WEREWOLF BY NIGHT

Jack Russell suffers from lycanthropy, a curse passed down through his family's lineage. Though savage at first, Russell eventually learns to control his bestial impulses and uses them to fight the forces of evil. Though not as memorable as *Tomb of Dracula*, the title continued Marvel's practice of merging old horror properties with its wider universe.

Created by Gerry Conway and Mike Ploog, the character debuted in 1992's *Marvel Spotlight* #2 and soon garnered his own title, which ran 43 issues. The usual guilt that plagues the lycanthrope is present throughout the series, but Jack is able to ease some of that tension by acting more like a superhero and less like a monster. In fact, out of all the Marvel monsters of this era, Russell is the most heroic, often teaming up with other costumed characters such as Spider-Man, Doctor Strange, Moon Knight and Iron Man.

This werewolf never forgot his roots, however, and could also be seen associating with – and fighting – fellow horror luminaries such as Dracula, Morbus, Ghost Rider and Man-Thing.



MAN-THING

Though debuting in 1971 in *Savage Tales* #1, a black-and-white magazine that only lasted a single issue, Man-Thing wouldn't resurface until the following year in *Astonishing Tales* #12. The character was initially developed by Stan Lee, Roy Thomas, Gerry Conway and artist Gray Morrow.

Much has been made of Man-Thing's similarity to DC's Swamp Thing; both premiered roughly around

the same time, both are swamp-dwelling creatures, and both share similar origins. Like Dr. Alec Holland (a.k.a. Swamp Thing), Dr. Ted Sallis is a biochemist working on a top-secret government project in the swamp when an act of sabotage results in his transformation into a meshapen muck-monster. There's also the added wrinkle that Swamp Thing creator Len Wein worked on Man-Thing's second story, which was written before — but published after — Swamp Thing #1.

Despite the rash of coincidences, there's plenty to differentiate the characters. It's established early that Man-Thing is the product of both scientific and supernatural causes. He's completely mute, with little to no recollection of Sallis' consciousness, and oozes deadly acid when confronted with violent emotions — hence the eventual tagline, "Whoever knows fear burns at the Man-Thing's touch!"

Still, it wasn't until Steve Gerber began to write the character, starting in *Adventure into Fear* #11 and continuing into his own title, that Man-Thing's definitive run really began. While Swamp Thing was busy fighting analogues of gothic horror such as Frankenstein and werewolves, Gerber gave the Man-Thing a cosmic slant by making his swamp the mystical Nexus of All Realities — a focal point for all sorts of weird happenings — and the creature its guardian, defending his realm against demons, ghosts, interdimensional monsters and evil time travellers. It's a series of wonderfully bizarre stories, mixing the surreal with the philosophical and the grotesque in true Gerber fashion.

GHOST RIDER

The most popular character to come out of Marvel's '70s horror phase is Ghost Rider, the flaming, avenging demon-on-wheels who has possessed a number of characters since his 1972 debut in *Marvel Spotlight* #5. The original host was Johnny Blaze, a daredevil motorcyclist who sells his soul to the Devil in order to

save his adopted father from cancer. Blaze eventually becomes the unwilling servant of the Satan-like Mephisto and finds himself transformed into a burning skeleton-demon when in the presence of evil, compelled to punish the wicked and send them back to Hell.

Created by writers Roy Thomas and Gary Friedrich and artist Mike Ploog, Ghost Rider owes a huge chunk of his enduring popularity to his visual design. With his leather outfit and his flaming skull and motorcycle, he just looks damn cool.

THE SON OF SATAN

You have to admire the audacity of a mainstream comics company to proudly include the word "Satan" in the title of a book distributed to corner stores across the country. Stan Lee originally conceived the series to star none other than the Prince of Darkness himself, until Roy Thomas suggested it might be wiser to focus on Satan's hellspawn instead.

Enter Damien Hellstrom, the offspring of Satan and a mortal woman, who made his first appearance in *Ghost Rider* #1. To the surprise of nobody reading Marvel comics on a regular basis, Damien shuns his satanic heritage and fights both external occult forces and his own demonic nature in order to retain his humanity. Hellstrom was featured in thirteen issues of *Marvel Spotlight* before being granted his own series, *The Son of Satan*, which only lasted seven issues. However, the character was a regular in *The Defenders*, where his fight against Papa continued for another couple of years.



THE LEGION OF B-MONSTERS

NOT AS POPULAR AS THE A-LISTERS, THESE MARVEL CREATURES are hardly forgotten, but certainly deserve a bit more time in the spotlight.

THE MONSTER OF FRANKENSTEIN

May Stacey's creation made a few appearances in the Marvel Universe before scoring his own title in 1973. Written by Gary Friedrich and drawn by Mike Ploog, the series begins with an adaptation of the novel, then follows the creature's adventures throughout the 1930s before catapulting him into modern times. The series was canceled after eight back issues; the Monster has shown up a few times since, but remains somewhat elusive in current continuity.



N KANTU, THE LIVING MUMMY

After premiering in *Superhero* #100/101, the character returned to the series two issues later, headlining the book until it was canceled after a three-issue run. But N'Kantu, an African tribal priest who was embowed and mummified by the Egyptians, refused to those in his papylene wrappings. He went on to team up with Captain America and other heroes, participate in Marvel's big Civil War event, and hang out with a new version of the Legion of Monsters.



MANPHIBIAN

Marvel's University's Gill-Man, Manphibian, premiered in 1976 in the first issue of black-and-white magazine *The Legion of Monsters*. There was only one installment, but the name stuck around and in *Marvel Preview* #26, the Legion of Monsters formally debuted with members Morlok, Ghost Rider, Wolverine by Night and Man-Thing. As for Manphibian, he has stayed ready



submerged for the last 40 years, though he did play an active role in Rick Remender's fantastic *Frankenstein* run in *The Punisher*.

THE ZOMBIE

Originally created by Stan Lee and Bill Everett for *Menace* #5 in 1953, the Zombie was educated twenty years later for the black-and-white magazine *Tales of the Zombie*. The rotter in question is Simon Garth, a New Orleans businessman who is sacrificed by a voodoo cult but reanimated by the cult's priestess, who is in love with him. In Garth's case, however, love does not bite him free, and he's forced to do the bidding of whoever controls the amulet he wears.



BROTHER VOODOO

Premiering in *Strange Tales* #193, Voodoo is a supernatural hero along the lines of Doctor Strange, whom he eventually replaced, adopting the name Doctor Voodoo. Corresponding Doctor Strange was never a big seller for Marvel, Voodoo—who draws his mystical powers from the gods of Haitian folklore—had the odds stacked against him right from the start, two might explain why he was rarely glimpsed after his initial five-issue run, until making a comeback in recent years.



TIGRA

Formerly a superhero named The Cat, the character was revamped in 1974's *Giant-Size Creatures* #1 as a tiger-woman and heir of the legendary Cat People. Tigra had a couple of solo runs in *Monsters Unleashed* and *Marvel Comics*, but attempts to turn her into a busy Vampiress never quite took off and she returned to her superhero roots, finding her true home as a member of the Avengers. 'Nuff said.



THE DEFENDERS #92-111

BY GARY IVTLIN

"WE ARE THE CREATIONS OF HUMANITY ITSELF, OF PHYSICAL PROJECTIONS

of mankind's collective unconscious. We exist because men exists; we are, in truth, his dark side given flesh."

In issue #111 of *The Defenders*, Satan and his devilish brethren dropped what can only be called a hellfire-bomb on Marvel's superhero universe. This 1982 comic marked the concluding chapter in a storyline known as the Demon Drama, a twenty-issue arc years ahead of its time in terms of progressive, big-picture stories examining metaphysical horror in capes-and-tights comics.

With one deft word balloon containing the above quote, writer J. M. DeMatteis relinked the entire nature of Hell in the Marvel universe. Under DeMatteis' inspired redefinition, Marvel's various incarnations of Satan — there were approximately a dozen operating at the time, the most commonly deployed being Satanash, Gormogon and Mephisto — were actually aspects of Satan himself, avatars operating independently in their own domains.

Of even greater importance, DeMatteis also officially distinguished Marvel's Satan from the one in the Christian Bible, explaining that Marvel's character was so named because of the Bible.

"It was from that story that I took my current name," Satan explains to the aptly-named Defenders member Hellcat, "the better to be what men wants me to be. But I am not that Satan — if indeed such a being does exist."

Here was an unprecedented acknowledgment of one specific religion's idea of evil that allowed readers of ev-

ery religion to enjoy their comic books without bias or alienation. Neither does DeMatteis/Marvel espouse the Bible — everything is presented conditionally.

Particularly as manifested over *The Defenders'* Demon Drama story arc, this continuity move allowed for a pure, almost platonic definition of evil to operate, while simultaneously embracing numerous inherent contradictions. Just a few of them included the aforementioned multiple Devil incarnations, the duality of good and evil (particularly the notion that they are not so much negations of one another, but that they are intertwined, like light and shadow), and the idea that Satan could feel love.

The Demon Drama was precisely a kitchen sink of Marvel horror, forgoing guest appearances from almost every horror character in the publisher's stable, including Sins of Satan, Ghost Rider and Man-Thing. It was also notable for DeMatteis' creation of the frightening character known as Garogyle, possibly the first outsider citizen superhero (whose origin is strikingly similar to that of Todd McFarlane's '90s creation Spawn).

Highlights of the arc include "Hell on Earth" (issue #100), in which Satan tricks the Defenders into breaking their solemn vow in order to defeat him, "The Haunting of Christiansboro" (issue #102), in which the Garogyle's tragic past is both revealed and exorcised, and "Yesterday Never Dies" (issue #104), in which a lifelong grudge against the Defender named Devil-Slayer leads to the irreversible death of an innocent.

Bonus: two of the finest covers Michael Golden ever drew are *The Defenders* #94 and #96. Talk about the Devil you know.



BERNIE WRIGHTSON

MONSTER ARTIST WHO'S STILL SCREAMING

IT'S TOUGH TO THINK OF ANOTHER ARTIST WORKING IN HORROR COMICS TO DAY WHO'S HAD HIS FINGERS IN as many first-rate four-colour peas as Bernie Wrightson. The former monster kid says the dark side of the medium is where he belongs.

"Monsters are just a constant in my life, since I was six years old and saw *Creature From the Black Lagoon* with the 3-D glasses," Wrightson says. "I fell in love with monsters, I couldn't get enough of them. I was there every Friday or Saturday night for *Shock Theater* when they ran the old monster movies; I bought every issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and read all the horror books. People in your life lead of come and go, you have relationships, you get divorced, you move on and things change, but the one constant, never-changing thing in my life has always been monsters."

Wrightson also whiled away his childhood reading EC comics inspired by many of the artists working on those books, particularly Frank Frazetta, his embarked on a career in illustration, eventually scoring his first professional comic book gig with DC's *House of Mystery* in 1968.

It was while working on *Mystery*'s sister book, *The House of Secrets*, that Wrightson made his first significant contribution to horror comic history. Issue #92, published in 1971, featured a short eight-page story drawn by Wrightson and written by Len Wein, simply titled "Swamp Thing."

In the tale, scientist Alex Olsen falls victim to the machinations of his friend Damien, who harbours a secret desire for Alex's wife, Linda. Damien sets an explosion off

Alex's lab, and disposes of his body in a nearby swamp. But Alex doesn't die, and instead is reanimated as a violent bog creature, a mud-encrusted mockery of a man, who gets revenge on his would-be murderer but is then spurned by his wife, who fails to recognize her husband underneath all the mud. Heartbroken, the creature retreats into the swamp, alone.

"*Swamp Thing*, when you strip it down to the basics, is a retelling of the *Frankenstein* story," says Wrightson. "In the early film, Boris Karloff played him as a gentle giant, kind of a lost soul."

Like Karloff's creation, Alex Olsen's mud monster struck a chord with audiences, and DC soon commissioned a series, with Wein and Wrightson at the helm. *Swamp Thing* #1 debuted in 1972 and while the premise remained intact, the players underwent some slight changes.

Gene was Olsen, replaced by Alex Holland, who is still a scientist and still married to a woman named Linda. However, the disastrous love triangle was removed in favour of a more action-oriented angle. Now it is a sinister collective that attacks Holland, wanting to get their hands on a special growth formula he's working on in the swamp. They plant a bomb in his lab and Holland is caught in the fire, with the remains of his formula burning into his body, he runs out and plunges into the waters of the swamp, only to reappear as the Swamp Thing.

Swamp Thing's debut coincided with the Comics Code's loosening of its guidelines, and Wein and Wrightson took full advantage of the opportunity. In the second issue, Swampy faces the diabolical scientist/lover/ner Antan Arzene and his repulsive Un-Men — mashmen



Screwy Thing #10



creatures with two heads, multiple limbs, or arms where their legs should be. Arcane is also responsible for putting his own brother, Gregory, back together after his body is torn apart by a land mine – a hideous, patchwork creature that once again recalls Wrightson's favourite monster, the Frankenstein creature.

Wain and Wrightson would collaborate on the first ten issues of the series, which are still considered to be some of the best horror comics ever made. The duo gifted their green gothic age hot werewolves, witches, angry townsfolk with pitchforks, killer robots, a Lovecraftian monstrosity named Mr Nagolok, aliens and even Batman.

To comic readers stilled by a decade of Code-inflicted, horror-free books, *Screwy Thing* was like a fresh spring breeze. While many of its gothic elements may seem quaint by today's standards, at the time they heralded a virtual renaissance of four-colour horror.

The one aspect that remains eye-opening is Wrightson's gorgeous artwork, horrific as its depictions of the monsters the artist is clearly passionate about. The epitome of his work on the series is, ironically, final issue #110: "The Man Who Would Not Die".

After plummeting to his death in the second issue, Arcane's stretched corpse is rebuilt by his Un-Men, who unfortunately lack their master's finesse. A deformed, naked hulk, Arcane confronts *Screwy Thing* in the Louisiana bayou, only to fall prey to the ghosts of African-American slaves who don't take kindly to Arcane's threats of turning *Screwy* into his servant. They swarm the villain and literally tear him apart.

The issue also boasts a brutal flashback to a cruel

plantation whose cruel owner frequently tortures his charged slaves: are whipped, burned, shot and ripped apart. Provocative stuff even with the recent changes to the Code, and a fine send-off for Wrightson, who had decided he wanted to explore similar ghastly avenues, but with a little less colour.

"At the time, I wanted to work in black and white," the artist explains. "I had been doing colour comics for several years, and I was just looking for a change."

What followed was a memorable start on Warren publications such as *Creeper* and *Eerie*. On the side, though, Wrightson was busy working on what many consider to be his masterpiece: an illustrated version of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. He had first tried to read the book as a child, but was turned off by its desecillaries to the screen version he loved so much. But he eventually fell in love with the novel after rediscovering it for a high school book report.

"I loved the novel a lot more the second time around," he notes. "Little by little the story began to foster in my head, especially some of Shelley's images."

Wrightson was especially captivated by the monster, who, in Shelley's version, is an articulate, well-meaning soul trapped in a misshapen lump of chemically fused body parts culled from graveyards and slaughterhouses by the arrogant but idealistic student Victor Frankenstein.

Drawn to Shelley's sympathetic but understandably psychotic creature, Wrightson began drawing the novel's monster scenes during his youth. From the start, he based his illustrations on Shelley's work alone, ignoring Jack Pierce's pioneering makeup and Boris Karloff's nuts

performances in the films.

"Jack Palance's makeup never seemed to fit the monster," Wrightson says, "at least not in my mind. I loved the movies, but I wanted to capture Shelley's vision."

Wrightson continued drawing scenes from the novel, but it wasn't until his success on *Swamp Thing* that he conceived of creating an illustrated version. As a freelance illustrator and comics artist, he was able to periodically take time off between jobs, and soon he was devoting the bulk of his non-paying hours to the ambitious side project.

Choosing which parts of the story to illustrate was challenging, Wrightson says, as the novel contains "a lot of quiet scenes where no one is doing much of anything," but he already knew exactly how he wanted his monster to look.

"I wanted to depict him in almost as vague a way as he was described in the book," Wrightson explains. "There's a lot of speculation about what Shelley had in mind for the monster. She mentions that Victor got some of his materials from the slaughterhouse, so maybe there are animal parts mixed in with the human. There is also no mention of stitches, so you can't look at my monster and see where his arm is attached because she didn't specifically mention stitching anything. However Victor built the monster, it's all very mysterious."

There is nothing vague about Wrightson's version of the monster, however. Massive and muscular, with a fierce half-grin and sod eyes that quickly blaze with fury, the doomed creature combines the subtle characterization and romantic strains of Shelley's prose with the decidedly modern sensibilities of Wrightson's artistic leanings, including EC Comics icons Jack Davis and Graham Ingels, *Frazetta* and turn-of-the-century pen-and-ink illustrator Franklin Booth.

In keeping with Shelley's original vision, Wrightson also ensured that no matter how many hideous flourishes were added to the illustrations, his monster remained the novel's most sympathetic character, especially when compared to Victor Frankenstein.

"Victor's voice comes across very often as a whine," Wrightson says, "and he seems to spend a lot of time justifying himself for what he's done without ever really accepting responsibility. The monster wants him to accept responsibility, which is why he murders members of his family. He's like a neglected child trying to get his father's attention."

In all, it took Wrightson over seven years to complete the drawings. For a while he considered self-publishing



Here's Wrightson's Frankenstein

but realized he was neither a businessman nor a publisher. Then, around 1980, Jim Shooter, publisher at Marvel Comics, heard about the *Frankenstein* project and asked if Wrightson would consider publishing the illustrated book with Marvel, which was trying to get its graphic novels — still something of a novelty at that time — into regular bookstores. Shooter figured that Wrightson's *Frankenstein* adaptation, which could be sold as an illustrated book, would be the perfect wedge to break graphic novels into stores.

Marvel greenlit the project, and while work continued Wrightson received a phone call from Stephen King.

"Stephen, who I'd never met, called me and said he was a big fan of mine and explained that he was making a comic book movie with George Romero in Pittsburgh called *Creepshow*," Wrightson recalls. "He said that he and George would love to have an actual comic book to tie in with the film. The movie was already being made, so I had about three months to come up with a complete full-colour comic book. I did it, and King was so happy I came through on time that he said if there was anything

Daring Thing II:



he could do for me, I just had to ask. So I said, 'It just so happens that I'm working on this illustrated book and the people at Marvel will wet their pants if they have a Stephen King book.' He said, 'Yeah, you got it.'"

King submitted his introduction, and Marvel published the book in 1983 to rave reviews. Wrightson estimates that ten to fifteen thousand copies were published, how-

ever Marvel had little luck placing the book in conventional stores due to snobbish attitudes about comic book art. A number of copies were also destroyed in "either a fire or a flood in a warehouse," according to the artist, a disaster he claims was repeated when Underswood Miller reprinted the book in 1995.

"Most of the copies of that edition were also destroyed, again in a flood or a fire. It's like the Curse of Frankenstein or something." Despite a scarcity of copies, the book remained a fan favorite, so when the 25th anniversary of its publication was approaching in 2008, Wrightson contemplated a silver-anniversary edition.

He was working on the *City of Others* series with Steve Miles for Dark Horse, and at some point Wrightson mentioned his plan to series editor Showa Gore. Soon publisher Mike Richardson was brought on board, and the project came to fruition in the form of the new, oversized edition — available at comic shops and bookstores.

"In my 40-plus-year career, it's the best thing I ever did," Wrightson admits. "I forced a window into these illustrations, and I was absolutely ready to do all that work at that time. I was at the peak of what I do in terms of technique and skill."

Ultimately, it's all about the monster, which is why Wrightson has never seriously considered undertaking a similar illustration project.

"I've been asked if I'd ever do *Dracula* as a companion piece, but it just doesn't resonate with me the same way," he says. "We all have our favorite monsters. For some, it's the Wolfman or the Mummy or *Dracula*. For me, the Frankenstein monster has always been my labour of love."

VAMPIRELLA

BY LARI CRANFORD LANGE

IN THE MID TO LATE 1960s, YOU COULDN'T PASS A NEWSSTAND WITHOUT BEING ASSAULTED BY the phantasmagorical, full-colour illustrations that graced the covers of horror magazines such as *Cosplay* and *Ecce*.

But in September of 1969, a new magazine hit the stands that featured a sexy, nearly nude temptress seductively beckoning any nearby male teenager to pick her up and lead through her gore-soaked pages with the hope of perhaps uncovering a little more than the final outcome of each desecrated tale.

The magazine, named after the vision portrayed on its cover, was *Vampirella*, and it's lasted, in one form or another, nearly five decades.

Editor Forrest J Ackerman and publisher James Warren, who had tremendous success with their other publications *Famous Monsters of Filmland* and *Monster World*, hired a number of artists to come up with a look for their new vampire queen.

Inspired by a woman Warren fell in love with as a teenager, the costumes that Jane Fonda wore in *Barbarella* and, undoubtedly, Melia Murrell's Vampire character, they insisted that her wardrobe cover only the "saucy bits." Artist Trina Robbins had sketched out a beautiful but somewhat cartoonish version of Vampirella that she handed over to an up-and-coming fantasy and science fiction artist by the name of

Frank Frazetta. The knee-high boots, exposed midriff, high-backed white collar and distinctive Bathe Page hair-cut all came to life in Frazetta's skilled hands, and the sketches he sent back defined the raven-haired vamp from then on.

Vampirella's back story was just as outrageous. This wasn't some helpless girl who had been seduced by Dracula – instead, she had come to Earth in a spaceship. Her home planet, Drakulon, was a garishworld's dream come true: a place where everyone was a vampire and the rivers and oceans were filled with blood instead of water. In fact, the very first frame of the first issue introduced the reader to a naked Vampirella, revelling in a shower of fresh blood.

Originally offered as a bi-monthly publication, *Vampirella* became so popular by the end of its run it was available nine times per year. From 1969 to 1983 it spawned 112 issues, which saw the sexy "Vampi" progress from being a mere horror hostess who simply introduced each story to a full-fledged character with her own storylines – she arguably became the very first femme fatale in horror comic book history. What *Wonder Woman* is to superheroes,

Vampirella is to horror.

But despite the gore trappings present at the character's birth, *Vampirella*'s early tales (written by Ackerman) were light-hearted and silly, calling to mind the camp



adventures of Adam West's Bat-man (though with more blood-sucking). Like Uncle Croopy and Casan Reno, Vampirella was prone to bad puns: "You won't leave dead in wait!" she tells the corpse of an astronaut, proffered in suspended animation. Her subsequent blood feast is punctuated with an enthusiastic "Feed come, feed served!" She also sported a pair of retractable bat wings, used for flight and comic effect.

Another early story has the character landing on Earth and competing in a contest to be the cover girl for *Mondomula* Magazine. Adopting the identity Bambi Reika, she quickly impresses the magazine's publishers, PJ and JW (my similarities to Forrest J Ackerman and Jim Warren are purely intentional).

For the first seven issues, *Vampirella* served primarily as a host to other short stories, but things drastically changed in the eighth issue when the character began to headline the magazine as feature-length tales (roughly 21 pages).

Her tone changed wildly as well—now written and drawn by Archie Goodwin and Tom Sutton, gone were the puns, the silly stories and the wings, which are unapologetic after Vampirella is critically injured in a plane crash. No longer visiting Earth on a whim, she is now here on a search for blood because *Dizalulom*'s supply has dried up. Though not out to intentionally hurt humans, Vampirella soon gets mixed up in black mass rituals, assorted reanimator messes, and with a vampire hunter who believes her to be evil.

Because *Vampirella* was printed in magazine format, it was able to circumvent the Comics Code Authority. This meant that writers and illustrators could delve into more chilling and gruesome storylines than what was allowed in regular comic books.

Artists including Jose Gonzalez, Jeff Jones, Boris Vallejo, Leopold Sanchez and Enrique Torres brought to life many stories that featured Vampi battling her mortal enemies (Conrad Van Helsing, Ethan Scream and The Order of Chaos) while meeting up with the likes of Count Dracula,



the Dreamslayer and the Blood Red Queen of Hearts.

As popular as *Vampirella* had become, Warren Publishing declared bankruptcy in March 1983, and it seemed that she might be lost forever. But in 1988, Harris Publishing acquired the rights to *Vampirella* and began printing it again. The new publication copied the magazine-sized format of the original and incorporated reprinted stories from previous issues.

A new, now-adult-space black story was developed and the tone of the tales moved away from softcore teenage titillation, recasting the character as a harsher, meaner and more violent creature.

Unfortunately, it was a failure and Harris shelved future *Vampirella* tales until it could be reborn to compete in a marketplace dominated by superheroes.

Harris relinquished the rights in 2007, which were then picked up by Dynamite Comics in 2010. Since then, the publisher has put out several *Vampirella* comics, both ongoing and limited series. Dynamite has been able to keep the serious tone of the original Warren publications without the nastiness and unpleasantness that dogged her during the Harris years.

Despite her chequered publishing history, there's no doubt *Vampirella* helped pave the way for adult dark fantasy magazines such as *Heavy Metal* in the late '70s. And while Vampire was the first horror pin-up girl, *Vampirella* took the concept in both as outright erotic and graphically gory direction, inspiring a bevy of beautiful women, including Barbara Leigh, Julie Stuenkel, Kiana Baker and Brinke Stevens to don the skimpy Vampi costume and pose as the bodacious blood drinker at one time or another.

Though there's a plethora of *Vampirella* merchandise available (T-shirts, novels, action figures, statues, manga and even a 1996 Roger Corman-produced movie starring Talisa Soto), it was Warren that let horror fans know that the combo of dripping blood and heaving breasts was here to stay.

THE VERY VARIED VENTURES OF VAMPIRELLA

WITH NEARLY 50 YEARS IN THE BUSINESS, IT'S ONLY NATURAL

that Vampirella has been wrapped up in all sorts of weird adventures, even by her standards. Since acquiring the license in 2010, Dynamite has spun the character into some pretty wild yarns, both in and out of continuity.

DARK SHADOWS/VAMPIRELLA

Vampirella and Benitez Collins team up to do battle with Elizabeth Bathory and Jack the Ripper. Of course it isn't as simple as that, and the two vampire protagonists must first face off against each other. Highlights include Benitez and Vampirella visiting NYC's seedy sex clubs.



ALIENS/VAMPIRELLA

Space vampire meets xenomorph, but can Vampirella stomach the taste of acid blood? This is one of the more bizarre crossovers in Vampi's history, and a somewhat uneven tale. Perhaps the series should have addressed a more pressing question: If you get your blood sucked in space, can anyone hear you scream?



LEGENDARY: A STEAMPUNK ADVENTURE

Along with *Red Sonja*, the character is also reimagined as a Victorian, steam-powered adventurer in the unusually named outing *Red Sonja, the Phantom Flash Gordon and the Green Hornet* are also thrown into the mix. As a result, our heroine gets lost in



Legendery: A Steampunk Adventure #1

the shuffle. Plus, the sight of Vampirella wearing so much clothing takes some getting used to.

VAMPIRELLA/ARMY OF DARKNESS

Vampirella meets Ash, Deshaun, boomsticks, and bloody chainsaws. Groovy.



VAMPIRELLA FEARY TALES

To celebrate Vampirella's 45th anniversary, writer Nancy A. Collins assembled some of the top writers and artists in the industry, including Steve Niles, Stephen Blasette, Gal Simone and Joe R. Lansdale for this miniseries. Vampirella is sucked into a magic book and lives out twisted versions of familiar fairy tales. As fun as the stories are, the real high light is the reintroduction of Vampirella's blonde twin sister, Deshaun, who was last seen in 1986.





HEAVY METAL

IN THE MID-1970s NATIONAL LAMPOON PUBLISHER LEONARD MOGEL WAS IN PARIS TO LAUNCH

the French version of his popular humor magazine when he stumbled upon a copy of *Métal Hurlant* (translated as "Howling Metal"). The French comics anthology had debuted in 1974 and was chock full of illustrated science fiction, horror and erotica stories, all geared to an adult audience. Realizing there was a dearth of such material in North America, Mogel licensed the property for English translation and American distribution. After a slight alteration to the name, *Heavy Metal Magazine* was launched in 1977.

Labelled "The adult illustrated fantasy magazine," *Heavy Metal* quickly established itself as one of the most influential publications in comics history. Warren Publishing had been churning out black-and-white, newsprint magazines routinely geared toward adults, such as *Creepy* and *Vampirella*, but the company's choice of format and distribution owed more to bypassing the Comics Code than a legitimate desire to reach out to older audiences. Most of the stories still played out like traditional horror tales aimed at kids, though they were more gruesome than standard comics.

Heavy Metal made no effort to conceal its mature roots, proudly displaying its healthy doses of nudity, sex and gore on high-quality, glossy paper. It wasn't strictly a horror book, but even its more traditional fantasy and sci-fi stories were often filled with dark elements, gruesome characters and bloody, over-the-top violence.

More importantly, the magazine chose to reprint and translate select stories from the French publication, thus

introducing mainstream American readers to the works of European artists such as Jean-Pierre Gonnert, Philippe Druillet, Milo Manara and Jean Giroud, a.k.a. Moebius.

These artists brought new levels of detail, madness and absurdism to the comics page, the likes of which had rarely been seen in North America, and cemented the idea of illustrated stories as legitimate art. This was further reinforced by the gorgeous painted covers that adorned each issue, often featuring surreal images such as a rocking-horse centaur and a winged space gladiator straddling a rocket ship.



The magazine was not content to merely reprint French works, however, and also recruited renowned American artists Bernie Wrightson, Richard Corben and Walter Simonson to create original stories. Many of *Heavy Metal*'s tales were written by the illustrators themselves — another thing uncommon in mainstream comics at the time.

And though there was no shortage of thought-provoking tales, the magazine's emphasis was definitely on pushing the medium visually. There's no denying that beautiful and ground-

breaking art was being produced in newsstand comics, unfortunately, preconceived notions that comics were just for children often kept that art from finding the audiences it deserved.

Heavy Metal changed that. Besides bringing illustrated stories to savvy adult readers, the magazine brazenly declared that artwork isn't just a way to tell the story — it *is* the story. This would prove to be highly influential for the next generation of comic talent that was willing to let the wings

ALAN MOORE

IT'S EASY TO EXAGGERATE WHEN YOU'RE A WRITER, BUT THERE IS REALLY NO WAY TO FULLY EXPLAIN ALAN MOORE'S pivotal role in comics history without succumbing to hyperbole. Quite simply, Moore is the most important figure to enter the industry in the latter quarter of the 20th century. Epics such as *Watchmen*, *The Killing Joke*, *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* continue to influence the way comics are made, and works such as *From Hell* and *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* made a profound contribution to the horror genre.

But it all started with a certain mossy monster. *Swamp Thing* had somewhat petered out after Len Wein and Bernie Wrightson's epic ten-issue run in the early 1970s. Wein continued with the title after Wrightson's departure, but the book never hit the heights of those early issues, and by the end of the run it had become more of a science-fiction series than a horror one. It was eventually cancelled in 1976, after 24 issues.

Swampy made a number of appearances throughout the DC universe in the late '70s, mostly in stories dealing with the creature's attempts to revert back to his human form, Alec Holland. But it wasn't until horrormeister Wes Craven entered the scene in the early '80s that things really began to take seed. While Craven's 1982 *Swamp Thing* movie

was hardly a masterpiece, it did lead DC to launch a new comic series for everyone's favorite muck man.

The Saga of the Swamp Thing debuted to coincide with the movie, and it returned Swampy to his horror roots. As written by Martin Pasko, the tales were enjoyable and a vast improvement over the tail end of the previous run, but not enough to fire up fandom. In its second year, *Swamp Thing* once again faced cancellation.

Then came Alan Moore.

He was an up-and-coming British comics writer who had worked on the popular sci-fi anthology series *2000 AD* and the highly acclaimed *Miraculous* (renamed *Miracleman* in North America). His hard-hitting storytelling, as well as his mastery of comic book dialogue, had earned him a reputation for high-quality work and caught the eye of DC editor Karen Berger, who was looking for someone new to replace the outgoing Pasko. Moore took over *Swamp Thing* with issue #20.

By issue #21, he had completely redefined the character and the direction of the book.

Moore's first major contribution to the title's mythology was the revelation that Swamp Thing was not in fact Alec Holland. In Moore's reimagining, Holland himself had died when he fell into the swamp; in essence, his consciousness had been absorbed by the flora around him and, in conjunction with the plant





growth formula he had been working on, was used as a template from which the surrounding vegetation formed a distorted human body that believed itself to be Alec Holland.

While this sounded completely ludicrous and no doubt blasphemous to some Swamp Thing punts, Moore's presentation and writing made it not only plausible, but also genuinely shocking. What was once the horror of a deformed beast striving for humanity was replaced by the horror of something that had never been human in the first place and its realization that it could never attain its dream.

Nowadays it's quite common for comic characters to be retconned practically every other month, especially when a new creative team comes aboard. But in 1983, it was nothing short of revolutionary.

The next few issues deal with Swamp Thing coming to terms with the revelation. It's a consistently good if unremarkable handful of stories, but these were just the calm before the coming storm.

To this day, *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #29 stands as one of the eeriest and most disturbing comics ever printed. The story opens with the naked body of long-time Swamp Thing friend and ally Abigail Arcane lying

on a kitchen floor. Abby, bleeding and hysterical, tries to recall what led to this moment: the sudden change in her husband, Matt, to make amends for their failed marriage; his creepy new friends; and a pervading smell that she can't place.

When Abby realizes the smell (strongly implied to be semen) is coming from her body, the reader is treated to a horrific sequence in which she tears off her clothes and burns them, trying to eliminate the odour. She even uses an abrasive brush to scrub the reek from her body, scraping her skin off in the process.

It is revealed that Abby's husband has been possessed by her uncle – and Swamp Thing's arch-enemy – Dr. Anton Arcane, a crazed occult scientist introduced back in the first series who covets Swamp Thing's body and has a frustrating habit of coming back from the dead. The final scene in the issue, where Abby is surrounded and attacked by her husband/uncle and his friends – in truth, rotting corpses animated by insects – demonstrates the horror the comic book page can attain, bringing images of sexual violence to the fore. But the true horror of the issue lies not with the return of Arcane, or the walking corpses, or the recurring insect imagery (all evocatively and

modestly rendered by artists Steve Bissette and John Totleben). Rather, it is the undercurrent of incest, werewolf disease and rape that runs throughout the story that continue to disturb.

It's also why the Comics Code Authority stamp did not appear on the cover of the issue. Although some titles during the '70s had certain issues rejected by the Code (primarily when dealing with the topic of drug abuse), *Swamp Thing* #29 marked the first time a mainstream comic was rejected due to horror content and sexual undertones. While there was little fanfare at the time, this proved to be the first step toward making comics more appealing to adult audiences.

By this time, DC was becoming aware of the growing popularity of *Swamp Thing*, particularly among the older crowd. Rather than sacrifice story quality and the handling of adult themes simply to make the product more suitable for younger audiences, Berger decided to go for broke and defend Moore's decision to explore new and risky territory.

This was not only a important event for horror comics, but for comics in general. Finally, a major company not only acknowledged that an older audience existed, but realized it could capitalize on it as well. The seal reappeared on the next issue, but with #31 it disappeared from *Swamp Thing*'s covers for good. Realizing they were no longer bound by the CCA and that the title had begun to garner a sizeable adult following, DC supported Moore and capitalized on the turn of events by labeling the comic "Sophisticated Suspense."

Moore had made a deliberate attempt to steer away from conventional horror intagary during his first year, feeling there was no longer any place for vampires or mummies in comic books. However, by his second year of writing *Swamp Thing* he was feeling confident enough that he could make such horror mainstay work.

Issue #37 not only began a fourteen-issue odyssey referred to as "American Gothic," but also introduced enigmatic British occultist and Sting look-alike John Constantine, who recruits Swampy for the upcoming, ultimate battle between good and evil. What followed over the next year was a veritable of horror complete with vampires, haunted houses, aerial killers, werewolves, voodoo tribes, and one of the most disturbing of Moore's creations, an invincible, a creature whose



head is twisted backwards and whose arm was sewn into his spine at birth.

Once again, though, it's the subtext of these stories that haunts the reader's mind. For example, Moore uses the curse of the werewolf in issue #40 as a metaphor for the "curse" of menstruation and the prejudices women face in society. Similarly, his storyline involving zombies and voodoo in the American South was a thinly veiled commentary on racism and slavery.

Once the "American Gothic" saga was over, Moore decided to try his hand at science fiction, and the following year saw Swampy launched into outer space, struggling to find his way back home. While definitely less horrific than his previous stories, Moore used the character's cosmic adventures to explore mature themes such as rape, sedition and masturbation.

These stories, combined with the reputation that *Swamp Thing* had begun to garner in comic circles as



an adult title, led DC to begin labeling the series "For Mature Readers" with issue #57. Within the year, DC came out with a number of "adult" titles, many dealing with horror, including *Hellblazer*, *Sandman* and *Books of Magic*.

However, the industry's recognition of this new market would also lead to mainstream companies such as DC and Marvel losing much of their talent. A number of writers, including Moore, did not approve of big publishers placing labels on their titles and, in essence, restricting their work to a certain age group. Although they had more freedom than ever before, many still felt bound by the corporate mentality, visions of yet another Comics Code no doubt floating in their heads.

With the sudden growth in the industry and increased creative recognition, many writers and artists felt that their name alone was enough to sell comics,

and they left the bigger companies for smaller independents or to start their own imprints, where they'd have more creative control.

Among them was Alan Moore, who concluded his run on *Swamp Thing* with issue #54. No huge battles were fought, no major revelations unveiled. With a peaceful tale of *Swamp Thing* retreating into the bays with now-lover Abby, Moore bowed out as quietly as he had arrived.

Just as there are those who can view *Psycho* today and remain unimpressed, there are contemporary readers who can take in Moore's *Swamp Thing* run and fail to gather its importance. But for a number of years, Moore's *Swamp Thing* was the trendsetter, and his issues remain a bible of sorts, demonstrating not only the potential for horror in comics, but also the vast potential of the comic book medium in general.

FROM HELL

BY GARY BUTLER

DEBATABLE THE GREATEST LIVING COMIC BOOK WRITER

Alan Moore spent the better part of a decade living inside the mind of Jack the Ripper and writing about it. The fruit of his characteristically abnormal labour is the critically acclaimed, epic saga *From Hell*, "a melodrama in sadistic parts" as described by its tagline, which was written between 1989 and 1996.

Based largely upon a little-known 1970 speculative novel by Stephen Knight called *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution*, *From Hell* posits an entirely credible explanation as to identity of Jack the Ripper, in that he was Queen Victoria's personal physician, William Gull. But while credit for the great work goes to Knight, Moore's interpretation accomplishes a great deal more than simply "papering over the cracks" (his words) of Knight's hypothesis. Rue Marquesspoke to Moore in 2001.

What made you decide to do the Ripper?

In 1988, I was reading a lot about murders, getting ready for an as yet unspecified project; I wasn't planning to do the Ripper because frankly, it was quite played out. But nothing about any murder that I had looked up to that point had enough scope to say the things that I wanted to say. Around about 1888, the autumn, it was the ordinary of the Ripper murders, and there was a lot of stuff floating around which I had a look at out of a kind of general interest. I came across the Stephen Knight book, *Jack the Ripper: The Final Solution*, and thought, "It may be a piece of mass fantasy — a raving mad place of fantasy — but the threads from it lead to so many interesting areas." I realised I could tell the story of Jack the Ripper in a way it hadn't ever been told, using Knight's hypothesis as a base and then incorporating as much of the other books as it was possible to do.

Let's talk about Marie Kelly's dissection. How did you write that chapter?

I was very aware all the way up to Chapter 10 that sooner or later, I was going to have to go into that room with Jack the Ripper and Marie Kelly. And the only way

that I could be faithful and true to the actual event was to literally go in there, almost in real time, and take the reader with me and show the event in its full, glorious horror. To actually get across to people what really happened inside any of the glass that films or true accounts tend to bring to it, I wanted the readers to actually be in the room with me and Gull and Marie.

And do a bit of time travelling to our time as well, as Gull shifts forward to our society briefly and sees "a culture disintegrated even in its most abysmal wounds." There seems to be more purpose to Gull at that horrific moment than there is in our age of infotainment, and he truly becomes an anti-hero.

Someone actually wrote about that in one of the letters we got, saying it was "the most astute comment upon the 20th century that I have yet read, and it's coming from the lips of a deranged serial killer." I was quite flattered by that. It struck me that to some degree all the way through the book there is a sense that these events are being conjured from outside time — we even talk about Howard Norton, who published his writings on time in *What Is the Fourth Dimension?* (1884), which we have ring-

ling through the book from the very earliest chapters. There is also the Mosaicic view of space/time as a single block chipped out by the Great Architect, which is our job to finish. All of these things suggested an almost concrete view of time, where time is a great lump where everything is happening at once. This is congruent with a lot of the stuff that Stephen Hawking postulated. In the story, it struck me that, to some degree, *From Hell* isn't about things that are happening in the past — it's about how they affect us now, and what their meaning is for us now. There is a very strong connection between the 1880s, when those events were happening, and the 1990s/2000s, when I was looking back at them. *From Hell* was connecting up these times and asking how so many of the movements in technology and other fields in the 1880s had contained the seeds of every major event of the 20th century.





IN 1993, DC OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED ITS MATURE READERS IMPRINT, VERTIGO UNDER the editorial guidance of Karen Berger. The label would continue to expand DC's work in the realm of adult-oriented horror and fantasy, becoming a champion of creator-owned, mainstream projects.

Vertigo was the culmination of nearly a decade of experimentation, growth and development. The imprint's roots can be traced back as far as 1982 with the launch of *Carnival 3000*, which saw King Arthur and his misadventured knights fighting off a futuristic alien invasion. Eager to experiment with the possibilities of the direct market, DC decided to distribute the twelve-part limited series solely to comic book stores, bypassing newsstands — and thus the Comics Code Authority — altogether.

This gave writer Mike W. Barr and British artist Brian Bolland the freedom to introduce a slew of mature themes, including rape, incest, adultery, homosexuality and gender issues. In addition, the series boasted copious amounts of nudity, sex, graphic violence and, thanks to villain and sorceress Morgan le Fay, some welcome body horror. To top it off, the series was printed on higher-quality paper than standard newsprint. *Carnival 3000* was a critical and commercial success, proving to DC that the direct market could support exclusive material.

Meanwhile, on newsstands, Alan Moore's *Swamp*

Thing was continuing to challenge the Comics Code, and DC eventually stopped submitting the book for Code approval altogether. There were grumbles within the industry, however, and due to pressures both external and internal, DC began to label the book, first as "Sophisticated Suspense" and subsequently "For Mature Audiences."

By 1987, DC had released several comics to the direct market, though the majority had been superhero titles that were far less controversial than either *Swamp Thing* or *Carnival 3000*. The decision was made to shake things up with the introduction of the "New Format," a less expensive version of their direct books that still retained a higher quality than newsstand comics. These books would also circumvent the Comics Code, and though not all titles were horror-specific or controversial, this would become the format for most comics defying those criteria.

In addition to *Swamp Thing*, the New Format would soon be home to Grant Morrison's *Green Patrol*, Jamie Delano's *Melbazer*, Peter Milligan's *Shade, the Changing Man* and Neil Gaiman's *Sandman*. Containing graphic horror, profanity and overt depictions of sexuality, these books would form the core Vertigo catalogue when it launched a few years later. Not coincidentally, all bore Karen Berger's influence.

Berger began her career at DC in 1979 as an assistant editor, soon gravitating toward horror titles such as



House of Mystery and Moore's *Sweeps Thing*. Though it was editor Len Wein who had hired Moore for that book, Berger was a key player in the series' growth and success, supporting Moore's decisions to explore complex and potentially controversial topics.

It was her experience with Moore that led Berger to seek out and recruit more British talent for DC—including Morrison, Milligan, DeKane, Gaiman and Garth Ennis. It was hardly surprising, then, that DC chose her to spearhead the new mature-reader imprint, as Executive Editor and Senior Vice President.

"Our mission from the beginning was to produce daring, smart and provocative comics and graphic novels that would appeal to progressive comics readers and, most importantly, serve as great stories to bring new readers into the comics medium," said Berger in a 2010 interview with *Rue Morgue*.

Along with the aforementioned titles, Vertigo's launch included Gaiman's Sandman spinoff *Death: The High Cost of Living* and Milligan's gay-themed limited series *Expenda*. The latter proved to be Vertigo's first original project (i.e., not based on an existing property), as well as its first creator-owned title, which would become the same while dealing with original concepts.

While slapping a "Mature Audiences" label on books was an important step towards the validation of adult-oriented comics, the establishment of an entire imprint dedicated specifically to that end was an unmistakable proclamation that DC was serious about expanding the medium. It also sent a clear signal to new readers: North American comics had matured and deserved to be taken seriously as literature.

To celebrate that point, Vertigo began to regularly collect its series into trade-paperback editions in order to distribute their output to traditional bookstores. Though it wasn't unusual to collect individual comic issues into one volume in 1993, most collections centered around a specific storyline, character or creator. Vertigo was the first label to regularly reprint its comics in collected editions, sequentially and shortly after the release of the individual issues—a practice now widely adopted throughout the industry.

Not every Vertigo book was classified as horror, but it was definitely the horror genre that benefited the most from the imprint's creation and success. It wasn't just the ability to explore previously taboo topics in a mature and thought-provoking manner, or the freedom to be as graphic as an artist chose to be. It was the fact that horror comics were finally being taken seriously.



Here was one of the top publishers in the field asserting that, not only did it publish horror comics, it was using the medium and the genre to push the envelope of the entire industry in a non-exploitative way. DC was also proud of what it'd accomplished, and it wanted to make sure those works were in print as long as possible and available in big-box bookstores throughout the country.

It was a far cry from the image that horror comics had built for themselves over the previous five decades. Even at their best, they were primarily seen as cheap, disposable entertainment, easily digested in bite-sized chunks. Vertigo helped change that—new horror comics were to be treated like any other work of fiction, each issue a chapter of a much larger novel, conveniently collected in volumes meant to be reread and analyzed.

Berger resigned from Vertigo in 2013, under circumstances that are best speculated upon elsewhere. Her exit received little fanfare, belying her importance to the industry. Since her departure, Vertigo has become a pale shadow of what it used to be. But even if it were never to publish another title, its contributions to comics, and to the horror genre, would remain immeasurable.

THE FORGOTTEN

WITH MORE THAN TWENTY YEARS IN THE BUSINESS AND hundreds of comics in its catalogue, not every Vertigo title was destined to attract as much attention as *Preacher*, *American Vampire* or *V: The Last Man*. Here are a few worthy titles that might have slipped under your radar.

THE UN-MEN

by John Whalen

Spawning (literally) from the evil Anton Arcane in *Swamp Thing*, these mutated misfits got their own five-part miniseries in 1994 — American *Freak*: *A Tale of the Un-Men* by David Louapre and Vince Locke. The concept was revealed in 2007 with *The Un-Men*, a series by John Whalen and Mike Hawthorne. Both runs feature plenty of body horror, bizarre mutations, government experiments and the usual military paranoia. *Alas*, the latter series only made it to thirteen issues, with many plot threads still dangling like so many Un-Men appendages.

HOUSE OF SECRETS

by Peter Milligan

Unconnected to DC's two previous *House of Secrets* series, this book tells the story of a Seattle doctor named Rals who stacks up in a haunted house occupied by a ghost jury that hears the secrets of the recently dead and sentences them accordingly. Rals was a wholly unlikable character, which seems to have turned off many readers, accounting for the book's



short 26-issue run. (There was also a two-part miniseries in 2001.) Nevertheless, writer Steven T. Seagle presented an intriguing cast of morally ambiguous characters — both dead and alive — who have to deal with the chilling consequences of their actions.

MADAME XANADU

by Peter Milligan

DC's resident sorceress finally got the Vertigo treatment from writer Matt Wagner in a series spanning her early life in Arthurian times up to the 1960s. Highlights include fantastic art from Amy Reeder Hadley, a solid horror focus and compelling characterization. Unfortunately the book was a casualty of DC's idiotic decision to cull Vertigo of all its licensed characters, and ended after 29 issues.



GREEK STREET

by Peter Milligan

An update of Greek mythology set in the underworld of modern London, courtesy of writer Peter Milligan. All your favorites are here: Dedalos, Agamemnon, Cassandra and the blood-sucking Furies. Violent, complex, lyrical and not a little confronting, most readers stayed away and the book only lasted sixteen issues. A pity, considering the vast number of monstrous Greek tales left untapped.



DIRECT MARKET HORROR

THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY HAD BEGUN TO LOOSEN ITS STRANGLEHOLD ON THE INDUSTRY BY THE early 1980s, but it still dictated what was acceptable and kept a close eye on the major publishers. Horror comics had made significant strides during the '70s, but by the end of the decade they were spinning their wheels, four-colour fear hadn't progressed much beyond Marvel's monster aesthetic or DC's anthology format, which many felt had run their course.

Luckily, several elements had been simmering on the backburners over the last few years and were about to boil over. The first was the increase of stores dedicated exclusively to the sale of comic books. Fueling into this was the creation of the direct market in the early 1970s – a new distribution method spearheaded by convention organizer and comic book dealer Phil Seuling. His aim was to purchase comics directly from publishers and then sell them to comic retailers, bypassing major newspaper distributors altogether. Buyers could now benefit from volume discounts and order only the titles they were interested in – something not possible with traditional newsstand distribution.

This new pipeline made it easier, and more profitable, to establish stores that catered to the comics market. More importantly, store owners could have final say on what products were acceptable for their shelves and could tailor their inventory to whatever demographic they chose – including instant readers.

The final piece of the puzzle was the growing popularity of underground comics (we termed it differentials to themselves from mainstream titles). Since the late 1960s, artists such as Robert Crumb had been self-publishing books that dealt with explicit, uncensored material such as pornography, extreme violence and drug use, as a direct statement against the Comics Code.

Though not as common as stories dealing with LSD trips or sexual violence, a few underground comic dabbled in EC-inspired horror as well, including *Skull*, *Benjamin* and *Two-Fisted Zombies*. The books were crude, sexist and borderline misogynistic, with an in-your-face attitude that went out of its way to shock, provoke and offend.

Underground comics were generally distributed in head shops or at conventions, but in 1972 they grabbed the attention of the mainstream media with the release of the first X-rated cartoon film, *Fritz the Cat*, animator Ralph Bakshi's adaptation of Crumb's spangulous comic strip. As usual, with mainstream recognition came controversy and claims of obscenity. By 1975, selling drug paraphernalia became illegal in many states, forcing a number of head shops to close and therefore leaving underground comics with few means of distribution, save for mail order. Never-

theless, the success of the movement showed there were adults interested in reading mature comics – provided they could get their hands on them.

And that's when the direct market and comic stores swooped in to the rescue. Not only did fans suddenly



Mr. Monster



have a place dedicated solely to their passion — complete with easy access to back issues — but the rise of comic book shops also meant that smaller, independent publishers now had the opportunity to make their voices heard.

DC and Marvel were not the only comic publishers in the early 1980s, but they were by far the largest and, along with Archie Comics, dominated the standard periodical distribution channel to newsagents. This left smaller companies scrambling to reach outlets, and made it virtually impossible for new publishers to be noticed.

But now comic store owners were actively looking for material to both fill their shops and provide readers with books not available at the corner drugstore. As the number of stores across the country grew, so did the demand for product, and soon new publishers took advantage of that hunger.

Titles from companies such as Eclipse, First, Pacific and Dark Horse appeared on shelves alongside books from DC and Marvel, and these smaller publishers soon had an advantage over the two giants: they were formed with the direct market in mind and could easily avoid submission to the Comics Code Authority. Creators were free to explore topics and visuals that the bigger companies avoided.

But this wasn't just a retreat of the visceral taboos on display in the earlier underground comic, or a safe escape to books on the sex and violence found in magazines such as *Heavy Metal*. Horror wasn't even an initial priority for the new, independent comics vanguard. Perhaps creators wanted to experiment with other genres that had thus far been mostly ignored by mainstream American comics. Or maybe they viewed horror as a stale subject and had no interest in refreshing familiar stories — even with the allure of tapping the gore.

Instead, some chose to deconstruct the superhero genre, as in First Comic's *Nexus* and Mirages Studios' *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, while others opted to produce more modern, slice-of-life dramatic tales, such as Fantagraphics' *Love and Rockets*. It wasn't until the mid-1980s, since Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* had firmly taken root, that horror became a viable genre once again, and indie comics began to expand their catalogues to include more macabre offerings.

There was something for everyone. Pacific published the horror anthology *Twisted Tales* and introduced *Mr. Monster*, a pastiche of both the horror and superhero genres (both books would later move to Eclipse Comics). Arrow Comics released the zombie gore masterpiece *Deadworld* and, a few years later, its follow-up *The Dead* and, for horror novel fans, Innovation adapted Anne Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, while Eclipse brought Clive Barker's work to comics beginning with *Tapping the Veil*, based on the author's *Books of Blood*.

Horror may not have been leading the direct market indie movement, but once the system was firmly in place, the genre was definitely bolstered by it. It's difficult to imagine the above titles, along with many other genre books, being launched by any of the leading publishers through standard distribution channels.

Aside from newfound creative freedom, the industry also benefited from the influx of talent needed to fuel the new outlets. Some established writers and artists, having spent most of their careers working with Marvel and DC, were simply happy to stretch their creative wings with fewer restrictions. Still others were able to break into the business by starting out with smaller publishers more willing to take a chance on new blood.

Regardless of the creator's pedigree, it was a highly experimental and exciting time for all comics — not just horror — and rebuilt the market for the next four decades.

"Independent comic book publishers of the '80s came in at the perfect time and capitalized on the major climatic change that was on the horizon for modern comics," says Derek Rook, artist and founder of Haugh Horse Publishing. "If you were Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, you could come up with a book like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, go make 500 copies with your last-dollars ready and have a multitude of distributors ready to take the bull and run — and the readership was there in full force. We as young readers wanted to be entertained, provoked, challenged, surprised, entertained... and indie books were that window of opportunity."

FORGET ME NOT

UNFORTUNATELY, NOT ALL THE INDIE COMPANIES THAT SPUNG UP

in the 1980s were as successful as Dark Horse Comics, and many only lasted a few years. Still, their contributions to the horror genre are noteworthy nonetheless.

SPIDERBABY GRAFIX

Founded by Swamp Thing artist Stephen Bissette, Spiderbaby's main publication was *Taboo*, a black-and-white horror anthology featuring work from Neil Gaiman, Chester Brown, Moebius and Dave Sim. The stories tended to lean toward the more disturbing side of the horror genre, but its main claim to fame is launching the serialization of Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell's masterpiece, *From Hell*.



FANTAGO

Until the mid-'80s, publisher Thomas Skulan's New York-based Fantago was mostly known for publishing the work of cartoonist Fred Hembeck. That changed in 1986 when the company debuted *Gore Shriek*, a wildly popular horror anthology. The title's success led to a slew of horror books in the 1990s, including *King of the Dead*, *Kill Me Slowly* and *Alleged of the Living Dead*: London — one of Steve Niles' earliest works.



MILLENNIUM PUBLICATIONS

Founded by Mark Ellis, Melissa Martin and Paul Davis, Millennium was mostly known for its adaptations of Anne Rice's non-vampire books, such as *The Mummy* and *The Witching Hour*, and several H.P. Lovecraft works. Its crowning achievement, however, may be the four-part *Nosferatu: Plague of Terror*, which provides a background for Graf Drak that has little to do with the Dracula legend.



GALIBER COMICS

Galiber Comics was started by Gary Reed, who launched the imprint with two books acquired from Arrow Comics: *Deadworld* and *The Realm*. The company went on to publish a series of successful books and produced comics for TriStar Films, as well as an adaptation of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It was also the first home of James O'Barr's path favorite *The Crow*.



HIGHWAYS TO HELL: DEADWORLD

BY JAMES SCHMUTKE AND DAVE ALEXANDER
INTERVIEWS BY JAMES SCHMUTKE

LONG BEFORE THE WALKING DEAD HIT SHELVES IN 2003, THERE WAS ANOTHER BLACK-AND-WHITE ZOMBIE

title that tore a gory tear in the mainstream comic world. When the harrowing, gruesome *Deadworld* launched in 1987, there was nothing even remotely like it.

It begins with Mike and Gary, two ding daddies with hearts of gold, their girlfriends Diana and Chris, a precocious kid named Joey and his big brother Jake (the "leader"). As they struggle to survive in a world where the dead prey on the living, they're relentlessly pursued by King Zombile, a sentient, scheming, blasé badass who literally wants to take Hell on Earth.

The comic was created by Stuart Kross (the *Archie*, *Cap* and *Flash* *Griffs*) (the *Beak*) for their Arrow Comics imprint, as a showcase for artist Vincent Locke, who would go on to fame for his work on *The Sandman*, *Batman*, *A History of Violence* and ultra-gory album covers for *Queensrÿche*. Arrow published the first nine issues before closing shop. Locke then acquired the rights to *Deadworld* and Gary Reed picked it up, where it continued with his indie company, Galber Comics. As of issue #12, Reed became the main writer on the series, which concluded its first volume with issue #26 in 1992. After a year, it ended

where *Deadworld* was launched that looked another *Blaze* issue. After another fall, Image picked up the title in 2005 and brought in R. Lee Eury (the *Deadfoot*, *The X-Men*).

The last decade has seen *Deadworld* releases, graphic novels and anthologies with Mike such as *Slough*, *Recess* and *Recess* (in full). The renaissance of *Deadworld*, which shuttled in 2000 but returned in 2014, has put out several *Deadworld* titles so far, including *Frozen Over* and *To Kill a King*. In addition, Reed's *Deadworld* novel is forthcoming.

As the original zombie gore comic continues on, we tracked down GRTS, Kross, Locke and Reed to tell us about their working, talking, shilling dead.



What events led up to the creation of *Deadworld*?

Stuart Kross: In the early '80s I managed a bus station in Ipswich, Michigan, and sold comics there on a weekend. Some old high school friends always hung around, and as we talked about comics, the idea

became around to start up a business, aptly titled *Farther*. After a few issues and setting up at conventions, we started enlisting a few other creators and artists who contributed to it. Once we saw *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* on the shelves, we knew we had enough talent

involved in our line to try to launch Arrow Comics.

Stuart Kern: *Arrow Comics'* first title, *Tales From the Adventure*, was published in December of 1994. This was followed by *The Reader* and then the cult hit *Deadworld*... I also have to note that *Deadworld* was created specifically for *Woods*. After we published a couple of his pieces in *Fantastic Funnies*, we knew we had to find a project for him.

Vincent Locks: I met Ralph and Stu at the first convention I ever went to. I was seventeen and went with my dad. He's an artist and read most of my comics. I did a short story to show interest, but I was too shy to show it to anyone. My dad saw Ralph and Stu were looking at people's portfolios so he got me to show them mine. They liked it and said they would like to put it in their fanzine... It was a couple of months later they asked me to work on their zombie book.

What were some of the title's key influences?

RK: I'm a big *Night of the Living Dead* fan, and admirer of George Romero. I was also a fan of *Return of the Living Dead* and its talking zombies. So it wasn't long after that when I approached Stuart and Woods about doing a book on flesh-eating, talking zombies with a twist.

VL: There are so many influences. Gave Sam [Charles] Bell *Skeletons* (Venezia DC and Marvel titles), Jon Muth [The Sandman], Kent Williams [Redblaze], Bernie Wrightson [Savage Thing], Michael Kabala [House of Mystery], and book and magazine illustrators, especially Joseph Clement Coll and Harry Clarke.

Deadworld was the first comic I know of to have variant covers. What sort of censorship issues did you encounter due to their graphic nature?

Gary Reed: On issue fifteen, Mark Woodworth drew a cover of a zombie ripping apart a baby. The book will hold up at customs shipping into Canada. I had to explain that it was a dream sequence in the comic and didn't really happen, so they said that was okay. So, a dream sequence as a subtitled piece of work was okay but if it was just the fiction part, it wouldn't have been. Bizarre.

SK: We weren't directly attacked by any groups advocating censorship. However, we did get some comments from store owners saying it was hard to sell *Deadworld* because they had to keep it behind the counter with the



Deadworld #1

cover art obscured and only the title showing. Ralph came up with the meat pragmatic and simple idea: print the book with two covers, graphic and tame. One for the defiant fan and one that could be put on the shelf to find potential new readers. If you ever wondered where the idea for variant covers came from, this was it.

Gary, you're also a biology professor; how do you incorporate science into Deadworld?

GR: The main problem with being a biologist is that I know there can't be any such things as traditional zombies. So, when I approach *Deadworld* scientifically, I have to step away from the zombie aspect itself and focus on how scientists would deal with the situation... You have the scientists injecting people with viruses, cancer and bacterium like *Wesley* to see what happens when they get eaten by the dead. Are those diseases possibly transmittable? That was the premise of *Singh's* *Loveless*. In *Deadworld*, there's a doctor who tries to use nature itself in combating the zombies by using flesh-eating maggots to eat only the rotted flesh. It's a balance of bringing science in, yet you can't go too far or the series wouldn't be able to be written at all.

1990s HELLBOY

WITH GARY BUTLER AND APRIL SNELLINGS

ON DECEMBER 23, 1944, HE WAS BORN TO MURDER THE WORLD. A DEMON CREATED

in fire and summoned to Earth by Hitler's evil scientists in a desperate attempt to win World War II by bringing about the absolute destruction of mankind. Humanity would never know how close it came to extinction when the clandestine experiment known only as Project Ragna Rok was intercepted by a team of specially trained Els from the Bureau for Paranatural Research and Defense (BPRD), who narrowly averted the Apocalypse by intercepting the furious beast at the moment of its corporeal birth.

Taken back to terra Americana for further examination, the demon conquered from Hell's fury was a harbinger of doom in its latent state only. To all appearances, in fact, he was a tiny red infant—one that looked curiously like a little boy. A boy from Hell. Hellboy. Could morally responsible people raise him to live a life outside of his nature? *Hellboy: Seed of Destruction*, written and drawn by Mike Mignola (and co-scripted by John Byrne), hit stands in March 1994 and laid the

groundwork for an ever-expanding universe that now includes comics, novels, short stories, animated films and two Guillermo del Toro-directed live-action features starring Ron Perlman as the titular half-demon, half-human paranormal detective.

Hellboy also helped make Dark Horse Comics a powerhouse in the industry. Since its formation in 1986, Dark Horse had made a name for itself through licensed properties including *Alien* and *Predator*, as well as original creations such as Paul Chadwick's *Conan*. Despite its successes, however, the company was still mostly regarded as an indie darling, taking a backseat to Marvel, DC and even the recently formed Image Comics.

Hellboy served as a major turning point for the publisher. A wholly unique and original character mixing horror, adventure, pulp, superheroes and folklore, *Hellboy* became the centerpiece of what is now referred to as the *Hellaverse*.

A series of titles that are intertwined and connected, spanning numerous characters and timelines and rivaling anything dreamed up by Marvel or DC.

Ironically, the character started out as an idea for a Batman story ("Sanctum," *Legends of the Dark Knight*



#54, 1993). Mignola plotted a supernatural story where Batman falls into a grave and is set upon by a skeleton that literally sucks the life out of him. While physically trapped in the ground, Batman also battles the spirit of the skeleton in an ethereal dream world.

Mignola enjoyed working on that story so much he decided to explore more tales with a supernatural slant, but using his own creations instead of other people's characters. So he began to sketch out a central character for his occult adventures: Hellboy himself, the would-be Beast of the Apocalypse. But if you look past Hellboy's blood-red skin, cloven hoofs and self-mutilated devil horns, you're left with less a demon out of Hell than a fish out of water. In the classic vein of metaphoric mythology, Hellboy doesn't see himself as a monster.

Raised by humans, he thinks he's human — or at least he wants to be one, despite the fact that he's built like the Hulk and has an ever-meener right hook (given that the hand in question is made out of mysterious, otherworldly stone). It's an endearing story — one that doesn't just facilitate sympathy for the piteous creature, but demands it. And it is perhaps Hellboy's inner humanity — his ability to love, his desire for acceptance, his belief in pure-hearted justice — that has attracted so many readers.

"Hellboy was raised by really good people," Mignola told *Ave Arcane* in 2004, on the eve of the character's tenth anniversary. "I always equate it to stones you hear about a cat that grows up among dogs and therefore thinks it's a dog. Hellboy grew up around people, and therefore just thinks of himself as a person, a regular Joe. So really, he's got a huge case of denial. In fact, when I originally wrote the comic, my intention was never to deal with his origins at all, other than those first eight pages of the first series [*Seed of Destruction*], where you saw him appear as a baby. I was just going to treat him like a regular guy — a regular guy who would be much more fun to draw. The idea was, it was going to be hilarious that Hellboy thinks he's an average Joe when he looks like the stereotypical Owl!"

Eventually it's revealed that Hellboy's mother was in fact human, a witch and consort to the demon Azazel, duke of Hell and Hellboy's biological father. Hellboy's lineage, and his potential destiny as the harbinger of the Apocalypse, formed the core of his



early adventures, though he still found time to fight plenty of monstrous evils on Earth as the "World's Greatest Paranormal Investigator."

And that's no hyperbole. Along with fellow BPRD agents Liz Sherman, a pyrokinetic, and the amphibious Abe Sapien, Hellboy found himself embroiled in a series of globe-trotting adventures, facing many supernatural terrors that drew from various countries' legends and folklore.

"From the very start, I wanted to use Hellboy as a device to investigate folklore," says Mignola. "The way the comic is structured, there's 50 years between his origin and the setting of the original storyline, *Seed of Destruction*. For me as a writer, you have to understand that was structured to give me 50 years of Hellboy's life to have him wander the world. And as time permits and my schedule allows, I tackle folklore and essentially fill in the blanks of his life."

In Russia, Hellboy battles the supernatural witch Baba Yaga, the story "The Corpse" is inspired by the Irish folktale *Teng O'Xane* and the *Cosplay*; and there are various forms of homunculi throughout the series.



that draw on German legends as well as the Jewish story of the Golem. It seems, however, that Mignola has a particular affinity for English folklore. Indeed, Hellboy eventually learns that he is the last living heir of the legendary Arthur Pendragon and even gets to wield Excalibur itself.

"Some of the most horrifying things I've ever read are oriental and Japanese stories," Mignola notes. "Thing is, I'm talking about stuff that's so insanely terrifying that it actually becomes comical. England, on the other hand, not just because of the folklore, but the literary tradition, holds a lot of appeal. You've got the fairy tales, the folk tales, the ghost stories, the gothic literature. I guess what it boils down to is that England and Europe have the stuff I understand the best; being brought up with it has caused me to spend time ruminating on it and therefore, in the grand scheme, it makes sense to me."

The exploration of folklore has allowed Mignola to introduce all kinds of creatures, large and small, into the series. Whether mythical or mundane, befitting or small, the Helliverse has been a smorgasbord of

horrific manifestations. Hellboy and the BPRD have encountered ghosts, witches, vampires, giant frogs and lots of Lovecraftian, tentacle-dwelling things.

"There are different kinds of horror, and the kind that always appealed to me is the kind that involves creatures," Mignola explains. "My start with horror goes back to sixth grade when I read *Dracula*—I was hooked. I remember making a conscious decision to spend the rest of my life reading and thinking about it, and I pretty much never turned back. It was an easy jump from *Dracula* to books like Bernard J. Hurwood's anthology *Passport to the Supernatural*, which not only has vampires and werewolves from all over the world, but all kinds of other creatures. So with a lifetime of exposing myself to diversity in monsters, making the jump to the 'bigger picture' of folklore was a natural move. And as an artist, I've always loved the challenge of reading a description of some absurd creature and giving it my best shot to try to make that thing look spooky, or cool, or—which happens all the time—glib."

When asked if there was a particular creature he found challenging to realize, Mignola is quick to answer:

"There have been a few, but the Malaysian vampire [in the 2004 story 'The Penanggalan'] was definitely a tough one. It's made up of guts and intestines that leave the body and fly around—with a human head on top, too. So you go, 'Well, that's... maybe horrific.' Because the thing is, when you try to draw it, it just looks kinda goofy."

Despite all the visceral horror elements present in Hellboy, Mignola has a very clear view of what he personally finds to be the most horrific aspect of the series:

"Horror is a weird thing. To me, the most horrible thing in Hellboy is the idea that you are predestined to do something evil. If you are the Beast of the Apocalypse, then eventually you are going to be forced, by some kind of fate, to bring about this horrible destruction, or unleash this plague or whatever it's going to be—all of that stuff is going to come out of you. Imagine the personal, psychological implications of that."

Talk of Hellboy's destiny brings up the argument of nature vs. nurture, a recurring theme since the character's introduction and one that continues to plague him.



"That's the question of the gnostic element," Mignola points out. "Is there something in a personality that you can't escape, and is it just going to wear you down over the years? And, even spookier, if you believe in real destiny kind of stuff and say, 'I'm not going to do this, I'm not going to go over there, I'm going to go over there...' Well, what's to say that going over there isn't going to bring about the same thing in a different way? Free will implies control, but is it necessarily the case that you have control? Are some things beyond your control?"

Hellboy's fate was irrevocably changed in the 2011 series *The Fury*, when his heart was torn out by the witch Minus and he departed the earthly plane, seemingly forever. This was far from the end for the Helliverse, however. The BPRD continue the battle in its own book, currently embroiled in its most ambitious storyline yet: *Hell on Earth*. Meanwhile, Abe Sapien is off finding himself in his own eponymous

series, and Hellboy lives, albeit in a younger form, courtesy of the *Hellboy* and the *BPRD* ongoing series, which takes place in the early 1930s.

There have also been numerous other spinoffs over the years featuring a variety of Helliverse characters, including pulp hero Lobster Johnson, set in the 1930s; Sir Edward Grey, Witchfinder, set in the Victorian era; and Sledgehammer 44, a living robot battling the Nazis during World War II. There's also been *Frankenstein Underground*, following the story of the Frankenstein Monster after his appearance in the graphic novel *House of the Living Dead*.

Mignola continues to oversee all the books in the Helliverse to ensure continuity and consistency, often working with other writers on scripting duties. Occasionally he'll draw a short tale, but the majority of his artwork for the spinoffs in recent years has appeared on covers, saving regular interior duties for the continuing saga of Hellboy himself.



When Hellboy died in 2011, fans feared it might signal the end of both the character and Mignola's involvement in the Helliverse. Their fears were assuaged in 2012 when Mignola announced *Hellboy in Hell*, an ongoing series that follows Big Red's adventures in the underworld, written and drawn by his creator.

When Rue Morgue caught up with Mignola in 2014 to celebrate the character's twentieth anniversary, he waxed poetic on the previous two decades and how far Hellboy has come.

"He's evolved in very interesting ways. He's certainly gotten more introspective, though I try not to write him that way. His world has changed a lot, certainly with moving him to Hell. I didn't realize that it would also be a challenge, once I killed him off, to have to write a guy who was not just dead, but in Hell. How do you deal with a character who's kind of lost everything, but is still going? I don't want it to be stagnant; it's got to always be changing. Which means, at some point, you're going to turn a corner and go, 'Well, I'm gonna miss the guy he used to be.'"

"The beauty of *Hellboy* and of this structure I'm using is that there's so much room to do stories about Hellboy when he had a less complicated life. We're doing a couple of new *Hellboy in Mexico* stories [set in 1956], and there's talk of doing some other Hellboy stories set in simpler times, even before anybody was laying the whole *Beast-of-the-Apocalypse* prophecy on him, when he really thought he was just one of the guys."

Hellboy's attitude of being "just one of the guys" is severely tested during *Hellboy in Hell* as he is constantly reminded of his lineage. During his journey, he encounters his demonic father as well as his siblings, who aren't particularly happy with the way he's squandered his birthright. It's an excuse for both the character and Mignola to reflect on the past—and perhaps think of things they may have done differently.

"If I could draw it better, that would be great," Mignola says with a laugh. "I'd like to think if I went back, I'd have the confidence to script the first *Hellboy* series myself. Nothing against John Byrne, but it does seem very different than the later *Hellboy* stuff. But that's just one of those things I had to go through to get to where I was going. I'm pretty happy with the way it's all worked out. I think we've done okay."

HELL ON THE BIG SCREEN

THERE HAVE BEEN TWO **HELLBOY** THEATRICAL FILMS, BOTH

directed by Guillermo del Toro. 2004's *Hellboy* and 2008's *Hellboy 2: The Golden Army*. *Hellboy* creator Mike Mignola ended up working with del Toro on both movies, but he acknowledges that his participation in the *Hellboy* cinematic universe was never a given.

"I knew Neil Gaiman optioned *The Sandman* and washed his hands of it immediately, leaving Hollywood would very likely handle the ball," Mignola allows. "Well, that certainly could have happened. There were no conditions in the option saying Mignola must be involved." A different director could have easily come in and said, "Let's make it 100 percent. We'll give *Hellboy* two gloves, and we'll give his horns back, and we don't want Mignola on the set." Basically, I wasn't looking to get into the movie business. It was del Toro who wanted me involved."

Despite Mignola's participation, he knew the films would not be 100 percent faithful to his original work—a situation he was actually comfortable with because of del Toro's track record.

"Before the first film, I had seen *Shogun* and *Jinn*, and I really liked both of them," says Mignola. "I love that [del Toro] adds his own personality to his pictures—he has his own unique bag of tricks that he brings to all of his movies. So when I first met him, I said, 'Don't feel like you need to be faithful to my material. I'd rather see a great picture that's different from the comic than a bad picture that's real faithful.' He didn't lose a second before saying, 'We, I want to do the comic.' And the result has been a really interesting collaboration because his personality is all over this picture, but so is mine."

As a result, the first movie follows the first *Hellboy* story arc, *Stand at Attention*, fairly closely, though it also throws in elements from the short story "The Corpse," in which Hellboy has to carry a roadside

corpse on his back in order to gain vital information.

"I wasn't surprised that it ended up in there, because Guillermo, like a lot of people, thinks it's the best *Hellboy* story," Mignola recalls. "Because, hey—who doesn't like a talking corpse?"

Not all of del Toro's proposed additions went over as well with *Hellboy*'s creator, though.

"Originally *Hellboy* was going to show up in a post-credits, and I said, 'You know, man, I trust you on most things, but you lost me here.' And I'd forgotten about this, but he recently reminded me that there was going to be something where Abe Sapien's mouth was going to extend out when he ate, sort of like [the character] in *Alien*. I said, 'Nah, it's just going to be gross. Let's not do that.'"

The two *Hellboy* films were relatively well-received by fans and critics, yet their middling box office returns have cast doubts on any future installments, despite del Toro's willingness to make a third *Hellboy* picture. For his part, Mignola remains wary.

"As much as I enjoyed doing the movies, I think it's unrealistic to expect del Toro to make a third movie," he says. "I spoke to him recently, and [when the topic came up], we both just laughed. It's a strange spot with the movies because, especially with the second one, it seemed so far away from the comic that a third movie would be even that much farther away from [the source material]. On one hand, it would be really interesting to see what [del Toro] would do, but at the same time, it would redefine who *Hellboy* is for most people."

"I found it was much easier to say, 'Do whatever you want,' than to sit in a room while a guy is doing whatever he wants, especially when you say, 'Let's do this,' and somebody else says, 'We, we're going to do this instead.' It's weird when there's a *Hellboy* thing and it's not [my] thing."





SPAWN

BY GARY BUTLER

IT'S BEEN NEARLY A QUARTER-CENTURY SINCE TODD MCFARLANE BOLDLY DECIDED TO SPAWN HIS own supernatural anti-hero. Spawn, the original protagonist of the Image empire's flagship title (albeit not the publishing house's top-seller for quite some time now).

For many years, the character was a paragon of success, spawning (and inspiring) several spinoff titles, a line of action figures that revolutionized the toy industry, an HBO animated series and a box-office feature film (and nearly two decades of talk of a sequel). It's easy to forget, however, amidst all the paraphernalia and hype and buzz in popularity, just how much of a game changer the character was.

The skinned anti-hero Al Simmons was a hitman for the American government who was framed and assassinated; at the moment of his death, a deal made with a demon returned him to Earth to fight in the war against Heaven, resurrected as the all-powerful Hellspawn (Spawn to his friends). Spawn would fight a variety of evils, from the demonic to human serial killers, usually with excessive violence and a fair amount of blood and guts spilled.

McFarlane had always demonstrated an affinity for horror, especially in the visual department. For DC's *Infinity Inc.*, he designed the menacing, skull-faced Mister Bones. Whore and leech and firing caps bear somewhat of a resemblance to Spawn. And for Marvel's *Splinter-Man*, he helped create the vicious alien symbiote Venom. With its



long, scabbing tongue, razor-sharp teeth and propensity to maul and kill, Venom would fit perfectly in Spawn's dark world. Yet the artist was always bound by the rules of an editor's room, not to mention a certain Comics Code.

With the founding of Image and the creation of Spawn, McFarlane now had the freedom to fully unleash his artistic vision, both as an artist and as a writer. While most horror comics of the day, especially when dealing with superheroes such as Batman or even Swamp Thing, were channeling Universal Monsters and gothic horror, McFarlane's Spawn decided instead to look at films like *The Evil Dead* for inspiration.

This is a fancy way of saying Spawn took the anti-hero concept

to new, visceral levels. Guts-and-gore, gnarled members and copious amounts of blood and other bodily fluids were frequently on display. While similar scenes were



common in adult horror books, they were misty, if even seen in what was culturally a superhero comic.

The release of *Spawn* also coincided with the legal comic boom of the early '90s, and it is estimated the first issue sold 1.7 million copies — by comparison, the highest-selling comics in today's market barely reach 100,000 copies. As a result, *Spawn*'s comics were able to reach a mass audience, both young and old, that would have been unheard of only a decade earlier.

Though it's easy to point to McFarlane's distinctive and expensive art as the real cause of the comic's popularity, that's a disservice of the fact that he created a compelling universe with well-written characters. Al Simmons is haunted, literally and figuratively, by both his past sins and his new, reawakened role as Hell's champion. His wife, Wanda, is now married to the man who caused his death and they have a child together. It's manipulative angst in the tradition of Marvel Comics, but it works toward endearing the character to readers and also gives us a reason to cut him some slack when he goes a bit too ballistic.

Similarly, McFarlane did a great job in devising a

reasonable rogue's gallery for his new hero: Minkoogoo, the demon responsible for creating Spawn; Billy Blackclaw, the child-killer who Spawn kills in the first story arc, only for him to return as a servant of Molebogus; and the vile Volder, who disguises himself as a creepy clown and roams the Earth harvesting evil souls for Hell's army.

Spawn's popularity peaked in the summer of 1997, with the theatrical release of the live-action movie. While the opening weekend box office was promising, it quickly sank and a sequel has been in development hell ever since. In many ways, the film's trajectory would foreshadow that of the comic: an initial burst of brilliance, followed by a dimming of the light.

McFarlane wrote the book regularly until issue #71 (making room for guest artists by Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman, Grant Morrison and Frank Miller, at which point he was followed by Brian K. Vaughan and then David Wise, creator of the horror masterpiece *Strange Embrace* and the primetime overlooked *Darkwatch*). *Redemption* (a fast-moving superhero take on the true story of alleged "devil worshippers" the West Memphis Three).

After the release of *Spawn* with issue #150, and spent eighteen months tying up all of those loose ends. With McFarlane's blessing, he dove rather in the long-promised *Armageddon* and came up with the most audacious idea since Gaiman made Lucifer hand over the keys to Hell in *The Sandman*: he placed God and Satan among us on Earth, disguised as psychotic twin toddlers.

Hill's excellent run, along with artist Brian Haberlin, gave the book a cinematic feel heavily influenced by J-horror, particularly Takashi Miike's *APD Psycho*. Hill left after issue #164 and McFarlane once again became the book's writer, temporarily. This was followed by a period of some instability, both behind the scenes and on the page. Al Simmons was replaced as Spawn by Jim Downing, and the book went through several writers.

But now, Al Simmons is back, and as of #256 so is McFarlane, along with Image founder Erik Larsen, who will be co-writing and sharing the art chores. Up first, the duo are planning a storyline called the "Satan Saga Wars," a four-part battle to determine the final resting place of *Spawn*'s ex-wife Wanda, who was recently murdered and whose soul now resides in limbo.

After that, McFarlane is planning to unleash new villains and a new direction for the character. With *Spawn*'s 20th anniversary on the horizon, here's hoping the character can regain his much-deserved status as a horror icon.



MANGA

BY TAMI COSTELLO AND NOEL ALEXANDER

WHILE MAINSTREAM NORTH AMERICAN COMICS FOCUSED ON SUPERHEROES ALMOST

to the exclusion of everything else, Asian comics of the 1990s offered a diversity found nowhere else in the world. Manga, as comics are called in Japan, offer a surprising variety of genres: action, sports, humour, sci-fi, crime, politics, romance and even cooking. And, of course, lots of horror.

The Asian horror movie boom of the '90s carried over into comics, and just like their cinematic counterparts, manga experienced a surge in popularity in North America during the latter part of the decade. In these pages we've extended up a few of the genre's most notable artists, whose work should be on every horror fan's shelf.

JUNJI ITO

It's people sticky with mucus and slithering on the ground, turned into frogs, no-larger-than-a-seal. It's fish walking around on mechanical legs. It's hair growing out of the ceiling. It's one head shared — simultaneously — among multiple bodies. That's Junji Ito, arguably the greatest living horror manga artist in the world.

Plain and simple: you've never seen anything like

this before. It's peculiar brand of horror has become so popular in Japan that at least fourteen movies have been made from his works, most notably the absolutely stunning Hong Kong adaptation of *Uzumaki* from director Higuchinsky. Other adaptations include *Kakashi* (a.k.a. *Scarecrow*), eight features in the *Tenchi* film series, and several made-for-TV specials such as *Long Dream*, *The Hanging Balloons*, *Demology*, *The Conversation Room* and *The Face Burglar*.



Born in central Japan in 1963, Ito was enthralled by Japanese manga as a young boy and began drawing his own in the first grade. After finishing school, he secured a job as a dental technician, all the while nursing an after-hours comics hobby. He was still working for a dentist in 1987, when his short story "Tomie" — about an immortal girl whose beauty drives men to butcher her — won an honourable mention in the Kaze Utsu Awards, named for the godfather of Japanese horror manga. It was a milestone for the quiet horror fan who had been enthralled by Umetani's work since childhood.

It's second great influence was Lovecraft, whose spectral haunts the artist's writer's visions with horrors rising from the sea, bodies taking on unearthly shapes, and mysteries that obscure the human mind. But where

Possession of Hell



HIDEO HINO

Imagine if you will, an old man attacked by a vengeful ghost that explodes from a pustule on his back, a bullied outcast who morphs into a murderous sewer-dwelling caterpillar, or a child who murders his abusive mother and bonds with the rotting fetus inside her corpse.

These are the wretched spawn of Japan's most prolific and influential horror manga artist. Over the past 45 years, Hino has created more than 200 books featuring with surreal terror where diseased mutants, hideous insects, anguished monsters and evil spirits infect families ravaged by mental illness, physical abuse, perverse obsessions and parental addiction.

Anchored by the dominant theme of a need for acceptance, which often results in strangely perilous situations where even the most horrific transgressions are as likely to be a blessing as a curse, Hino's stories are shocking and compelling in equal measure. His protagonists might eat maggots, play with bodies in the sewer and even torture animals, but they're driven by the most basic of human desires.

"Even though I draw grotesque manga, I think that you can't really distinguish between Japanese and Western people," Hino told *Art* Morgan in 2005. "I think that deep inside, everybody has some dark, grotesque part of them.

Thanks to that, it's not difficult for Western people to understand my work or to translate it into English."

Hino is considered a major inspiration to other horror manga artists such as Mamoru Osada (*Planet of the Dead*), Mr. Asai's *Amazing Frank Show* and Kenji Kishi (*The French-translated La Femme Dégénérée*), but his Poe-influenced style is mostly left in the mutating bodies, mentally destructive obsessions and surreal backdrops he shares with Junji Ito.

"I've never met him personally," says Hino, "but when Junji Ito appeared I knew that an amazing new talent had emerged. When I saw the movie *Uzumaki*, I thought that his situation of the everyday crumbling into a bizarre new world was much like my own works. The difference between him and me is that his pictures are much prettier



than mine. My drawings are full of twisted lines, and his lines are all relatively straight and pretty."

As opposed to Ho's debated realism, Hino opts for an unusual hybrid style that employs intricate and heavily shaded backgrounds and objects, combined with simple-looking characters with round doll faces. There are similarities to the art of Edward Gorey and Tim Burton, although Hino's work is much more graphic.

Laurence Bush, author of *The Asian Horror Encyclopedia*, describes Hino's output as "the Japanese equivalent of GC horror comics of the 1980s," adding that, "[he] portrays nightmares, illusions and insanity with convincing skill. He looks at the real world with Hino-vision penetrating to the gory, quasy substrate below the happy exterior of hearth, home and family."

Nevertheless, an artist like Hino could never have developed in North America's even traditional and conservative comic book climate, only in Japan, where manga is known for its explicit violence, gore and sexual content. There, he is a god, which explains the availability of grotesque — yet oddly cute — action figures based on several of his instant characters. It also explains the interest that the film community there has taken in him.

In 2004, Pony Canyon made a series of six live-action films based on the artist's manga, under the umbrella title *Hideaki Hino's Theater of Horror*. The adapted stories include "The Boy from Hell," in which a mother goes to desperate lengths to revive her dead son, "Dead Girl Walking," which features a girl whose body continues to function after death, slowly rotting and festering; the grotesque "Lizard Baby," which sees a horror writer's wife give birth to a reptile; and several others.

SHINOBU INOUE

A rare female writer/illustrator in the very male-dominated field, Komiko Inoue (a.k.a. The Queen of Horror Manga) came to horror as an outsider in an outsider's profession.

"When I was really young, horror manga had a short boom, but it was frowned upon socially and it was basically 'banned' from an artist/teacher/less-than-student — one of the reasons cited by social scholars was that horror manga had a negative impact on children's education," Inoue explains.

Regardless, she was drawn to the genre like a moth to a flame after moving from Hokkaido to Tokyo as a young girl. There was a manga rental store in her new neighborhood and she became hooked on the format. Shortly thereafter, she also started poring over parents



Your Story

to take her to scary kids' movies full of ghosts and monsters.

"I don't know why, but I was always drawn to the horror genre," she recalls. "I still have vivid impressions of scenes where girls were running away screaming from a mumified teacher, and those images stuck with me."

After the birth of her first child, two decades after she'd discovered horror manga as a young girl, Inoue began picking up a horror-themed magazine published by Asahi Sonorama. The serialized stories reawakened her love of horror, and she decided to pursue a career as a professional manga artist, or "manga-ka."

Inoue's break came when a publishing company called Kodansha, which started another horror magazine a year after Asahi Sonorama's, took notice of her. She was commissioned to draw covers for it, plus several pages of each issue were set aside for her to create manga stories. Before long, Inoue was riding high on a horror wave.

The first of her stories translated for the North American market was the serial *School Zone*. The tales revolve around the supernatural happenings at a not-so-average

School Zone



grade school. Volume One features an evil doll, a ghostly former student showing up in pictures, an urban legend about a gory, dismembered head prowling the halls for victims to plant itself on, and mirrors that act as a supernatural conduit for demonic possession.

What makes the stories truly original, though, is the way typical horror elements are melded to universal childhood angst in the form of bullies, being ostracized by classmates, getting in trouble with teachers, not living up to responsibilities, and other awkward social scenarios that can make growing up its own special kind of hell.

In one *School Zone* story, a kid-sized monster causes a student to put down the wrong answer on a test and he gets yelled at by his teacher, which in turn causes him the ridicule of his classmates, who he then realizes, in an epiphany of paranoid terror, are possessed. Throughout the story, real-life and fantasy nightmares amplify each other, deeply rooting the horror in anxieties familiar to the average reader.

Inaki says her style is derived from her two biggest influences: Hideshi Hino and Kazuo Umezu, often called "The Stephen King of Manga." She explains that Hino is a "kashi" manga artist, meaning his work deals primarily in the "mysterious/gruesome/abnormal," while Umezu developed that style, morphing it into what's known as "kyoufu" (surreal/fear) manga.

"The drama in [Umezu's] manga blooms from the horror in the daily life of abnormal, malformed worlds with warped realities," she notes. "The characters in his stories always have their own point of view, and that is

what makes things scary, it's not an image but the way the characters' emotions are projected upon the reader, making you feel not only scared, but tinged by jealousy, immersed in sorrow or tainted with a little hatred — or by the same love, love."

This approach of simultaneous physical revulsion and emotional identification is central to the narrative in Inaki's work, such as *Bokura Koi*, a memoirist tale of an undead girl looking for love. In *School Zone* there are horrifying, Hino-like images of the grotesque, but much of the terror is rendered in close-ups of terrified children's faces. While Inaki's artwork utilizes the brand of disgusting detail that riddles Hino's work for the most shocking moments in her own narratives, many more of her panels feature characters' fishy reactions to monsters, like the ones that colour the high-emotion environment of Umezu's manga.

Inaki crafts a particularly effective marriage of hard horror and children's drama — an utterly alien world to average Western comic book readers. After nearly 30 years as a respected professional manga artist, she knows exactly why these strange bedfellows have thrived in Japanese culture.

"I think it is because Japan is so peaceful — and when I say that, I mean sadistic," Inaki muses. "People tend to seek excitement in order to know that they're alive. People can get a physical rush from riding a roller coaster, which is excitement in a safe, contained way. Horror manga gives you this same sort of mental rush in a controlled environment."

MORE MONSTROUS MANGA

REFLECTIONS

KAZUO KAWA

They don't call Kuzo Umura the "Stephen King of Manga" for nothing! As *Reflections*, the first installment of his *Scary Book* horror anthology proves, he's a masterful storyteller. The longer of the two tales here, "The Mirror," details what happens when a girl's evil reflection steps out of the mirror to methodically take over her life. This maddening descent into despair/unger hell is well paced, save for some childish humour. The second story, "Dance of Vagabonds," a bloody tale of an aimless warrior seeking revenge, showcases Kuzo's talent for illustration, with its dramatic action lines and detailed facial expressions. Essential reading.

JOE LANTIER

DE WINE TOWN AND KINGS-IL TOWN

In this story of an island called Cheja, most of its inhabitants don't know that it's overrun with demons, and those who find out almost never live to tell about it. To make matters worse, there's a serial killer on the prowl. Into this mix comes Miho Wori, a rich girl sent to Cheja to become a teacher and representative of her father's business interests. Miho soon encounters the serial killer Pan, and learns that he may not be as he repeats himself has made him out to be. The two strike an uneasy truce, with Miho paying Pan for each demon he kills using all enchanted tools and secret "magicks." Along with the demons, Miho and Pan confront possessed children, a butler who is more than he appears, priests, monks and racket killers.

THE MALAY MYSTERIES

AN SON AND NGUYEN VANHAI DINH

The *Malay Mysteries* is a pair of uniquely designed and printed covers the dramatic Indonesian folk tales. The first volume, *Garden of Moonlight*, is the more horrific of the two: mothers and babies are dying in the night, their corpses found covered in webs. As the villagers search for an explanation — and a scapegoat — Mamby, an old woman versed in supernatural and herbal medicine, and Nidaydi, a teacher whose folk tale is science, not spooky, investigate. This does they discover points to a badless female monster as the culprit. But the

villagers, eager for an explanation, blame Mamby. The twists and turns of this 80-page tale are well thought out and wrap up in a chilling conclusion.

PRIEST

MIKE MIKE STEIN

Isaac Isaac — the comic's titular son of the cloth — is "a mean motherfucker" servant of God." But Isaac is as much evil as he is good. Half of him became evil after he sold his soul to the devil Beelzebub in exchange for the ability to kill the legions of undead plaguing the Old West (the story says it's Tennessee, but surely no part of Tennessee was ever quite so dusty or full of cowboys). Isaac made the deal after forsaking God, rejecting his true love, being crushed and pledging to fight the fallen archangel Tempestade and his army. Each issue of *Priest* is a non-stop action, and while the story is good, the visuals really set this comic apart. Hyung's art is significantly different from what most people associate with Asian comic art. Rather than big, bombastic eyes and too-stylish-for-words haircuts, *Priest* is furnished in a kinetic, angular style all its own.

THE BIRTH OF OCTOPUS GIRL VOLUME 1

YOSHIO OKADA

Clearly influenced by Hideaki Anno's creepy-crawly gross-out universe (particularly Anno's *Dig Dug*), *Octopus Girl* features a bullet, lovelorn girl who gains the ability to morph into an octopus creature with a human head — a power used to dispatch enemies, conquer her dream guy, battle a vampire and even make a similarly mutated friend. It's a bizarre, seewer-rats-of-grotesque body horror, cheeseball kiddie humour, murderous rage and teen sexuality worth checking out chiefly for Yamazaki's detailed and richly shaded illustrations.



The Birth of Octopus Girl Volume 1



BLACK HOLE

BY GARY HOLLEN

ADOLESCENCE, DISEASE, HORROR. TERMS THAT CAN EASILY SHARE ASSOCIATIVE OR METAPHORIC relationships in the "everyday world." But in the troubling nightmare of *Black Hole*, they are nothing short of reality.

Over a decade in the making, *Black Hole* is a trade-packet comic book serial released last fall by Kitchen Sink Press and later by Fantagraphics. Originally published from 1995 to 2005, it's an immense work that, literally, stands as Burns' final work on the concept of four plagues — a theme the artist has visited more times over his career.

"I suppose it's strange that I've always been fascinated with the transformations we go through in adolescence," says the Pennsylvania-based artist, who professes to having lived an "average" teenagehood before going to prominence in the '80s alternative comic era with peers Art Spiegelman, Gary Panter and Chris Ware. "Puberty's sexuality, acne, growing facial hair, various physical changes, with *Black Hole*, I was taking these ideas and pushing them further by having people become physically affected — diseased,

if you will — because of adolescence."

But in early-'70s Seattle, *Black Hole* is about a socially transmitted disease that selectively targets teens and teens only, for the most part, grotesque physical mutation. The book's convoluted, character-driven plot is riddled by nihil, creeping paranoia, so kids that the artist describes as "average, everyday high schoolers" and themselves betrayed by their own bodies.

Progressively, inadvertently, they form a collective living off garbage in a forested community in the woods. This is when alienation becomes personal, and Burns uses brutal physicality as a means of forcing both his characters and his audience to question the impact of such changes on the suffering individuals, as well as society's treatment of "lookers that got a bit mangled by the outlier."

In keeping with the fact that the events of *Black Hole* transpire due specifically to the loss of innocence, the story has no heroes or villains — only protagonists and victims. The bulk of the ramshackle flip-flops between two star-crossed lovers, Keith and



CHARLES BURNS

(Chris, but in typical Burns fashion, their ships don't so much pass in the night as veer into the Bermuda Triangle



Slip away the monster mask and *Black Hole* is a portrait of unrequited love — one of the universal adolescent experiences, and one of the necessary steps to adulthood.

But that's looking ahead of — or beyond — the story. If we here and now, Burns' book is about the caterpillars, not the butterflies. And these are some ugly caterpillars: In fact, the collection of double-page spreads that opens each issue is a veritable catalogue of mutations. On the left page, a headshot of a "clean teen"; on the right, the freakish makeover.

"The plague is a means to an end," Burns suggests. "If you think about it, it could equally function without the overt horrific portions. At its core, it's a catalyst for an extreme situation."

But then, that's the nature of horror in the first place. And sure enough, underneath all the bulbous foreheads and lank-necked limbs, the troubled faces of *Black Hole* are really, Burns allows, "just a bunch of homeless kids hanging out in the forest who form a community."

But the suggestion that these misfits are meant to reflect AIDS, or that the exile into the forest is a kind of political metaphor whereby "those who become sexually justice fall from grace as Adam and Eve did, is never far

away. Burns insists that these interpretations are "entirely subjective, and if I did address them, then I did it subconsciously. *Black Hole* is a story with a sexually transmitted disease, but it's not a morality play."

Certainly one of the creepiest aspects of *Black Hole* is the absolute lack of morality and judgment throughout.

"It's ambiguous and unambiguous," he says of the matter-of-factness with which the plague is treated — from the very beginning it's taken for granted as simply being a fact of life, therefore making some a much more suitable metaphor than AIDS. And to push the comparison further, by the end of the story, the plague literally cleans up.

Black Hole experiments gleefully with timelessness, foreshadowing, and cause and effect. To the first events transpiring in one issue might seem complete — weird, but complete — until vital information is provided in a subsequent issue, making things more complete and, naturally, weirder. To the next: check out the back cover of any given issue; all of them bear images that are cross-referenced constantly in various, disparate corners throughout the series. And in the last: the inside covers of every issue act almost as companion pieces to the above-mentioned headshots — in this case, featuring "before and after" likenesses in the woods inhabited by the diseased teens.

"It's an accumulation of echoes," Burns says. "That was always the intention. The whole series starts with a frog being dissected, and one protagonist seeing the future in its entrails, and all of that revolves upon itself in the end."

The mind-blowing conclusion contains what Burns calls a "Rorschach moment," wherein one character's dream becomes the dream of another, effectively passing the baton of narrative focus, but nonetheless looking back on itself.

Given all of the above, it's understandable that it would take over ten years to execute a meticulously planned story like *Black Hole*. Did Burns expect it to be this thorough, this demanding, this all-encompassing, this big?

"It's a lot more brutal than you'd think," he says. "Most of my previous stuff had been plot-driven, and I wanted to make a character-driven story. Also, I'd done a lot of stuff that had been serialized as a weekly strip, and I consciously made the decision to do a long comic book story. But if I'd known how long it would take, I might have backed away. In fact," he adds, "I asked my editor, 'Can we please not play up the fact that it took so long?'"



CHAOS COMICS

WITH BARBARA CUKING

HORROR COMICS WERE FIRING ON ALL CYLINDERS BY THE EARLY 1990s. THERE WAS VERTIGO ON ONE side pushing the envelope with mature storylines, and companies such as Image that expertly melded visceral violence with superheroism. Yet despite this bounty of riches, there was those that felt even more could be done to exploit the genre on the comic page.

That might go far in explaining the existence of someone like Brian Pulido, founder of Chaos! Comics and a staunch horror devotee. Chaos! debuted in January of 1993 with tales of a predator, and its creator named Evil Ernie, created by Pulido and artist Steven Hughes. The comic, with its gleeful cocktail of over-the-top violence and exaggerated horror, was an instant success.

Determined to further cultivate supernatural horror in comics, Pulido went on to expand his company's roster with several related character lines, most notably Lady Death and Purgatori. Soon, Chaos! took up the practice of billing itself as the place "Where Darkness Dwells" and aggressively pursued the underrepresented market with a slew of commemorative editions and special issues, as well as trading cards, apparel and toys.

During its heyday, Chaos! consistently ranked as one of the top ten comic book publishers in North America and racked up several awards and honorable mentions, including multiple international preening awards. At the heart of the company's success lay Pulido's horrific vision, which permeates every pore of his initial creation.



"Evil Ernie is a classic horror story," read Pulido in an interview with *Rue Morgue* back in 1998, at the height of his company's success. "There's an aspect to the story that is like a classic ghost story where you don't actually see violence occur, and that is based on suspense. But there's another aspect where there is that violent chaos. Evil Ernie is classically horrific, but it is juxtaposed with an action sensibility and a pop cultural sensibility. He's an updated teenage Frankenstein for the '90s."

Evil Ernie was part of an unholy triad of characters that was rounded out by girth goddess Lady Death and the winged vampire, Purgatori. Though originating as a full-blown demonic villain in the pages of *Evil Ernie*, Lady Death was re-imagined for her own series as an anti-hero seemingly out to destroy life on Earth, but only to rid herself of a curse placed by Lucifer that prevented her from walking the planet while life existed. The series took on



more wispy elements as it progressed, exploring Hell's hierarchy and its various wars.

Purgatori, on the other hand, was a mixture of the other two books, blending the "bad girl" aesthetic and demonic politics of *Lady Death* with the splatter and bloodletting of *Evil Ernie*. All three titles were huge sellers for Chaos!, and each brought a different take on the genres that Pulido was anxious to explore.

"*Evil Ernie* represents splatter horror. *Lady Death* clearly leans towards fantasy. In the original conception of her story, what is horrific is the notion that death can actually be something beautiful, a warm embrace. You are confronting your fear, but your fear can be quite beautiful—it can be something you are drawn to. Then in the case of a comic book like *Purgatori*, clearly she is a classic vampire. The horror element in *Purgatori* has a lot of the pearly stages that you see in a traditional vampire story."

Pulido founded Chaos! in part because he wanted to take advantage of the growing interest in horror that was pervading pop culture at the time.

"You can see it clearly in the movies, in video games, in musical subcultures that are gaining prominence—everything from death metal onwards, the stakes are very strong. My point of view from what I see is that pop culture in general is growing darker in that the themes that we are toying with really have to do with extreme life-or-death survival issues. And when that comes to prominence, usually horror evolves, because horror is about looking at what scares you."

Though uttered in 1998, Pulido's words still resonate today, reminding us that even in a post-9/11 world, society was plagued by anxieties and uncertainties that fueled plenty of nightmares.

"I would say that the average daily experience for the average person in America, due to the media and other things, seems to be more dire, more survival-oriented, more life-and-death," he said. "We live in a culture predicated by the media. People are told to lock their doors at night and fear their neighbors. Essentially, the message is that you should be afraid in general. So we cope with the fear by looking at things like horrific entertainment, where a fantasy environment allows you the opportunity to confront the stuff, kind of play with it and get comfortable with it."

Chaos! continued to mine the horror genre for the next few years with titles such as *Lady Demon*, *Chastity* and *Bad Kitty*. The company also developed a few music-based comics, including *The Cryptic Writings of Megadeth* and *Insane Clown Posse: The Pendulum*, both of which were heavily doosed with horror tropes. There were even Chaos! titles based on movie properties such as *Halloween* and *Stephen Sommers' The Mummy*.

Unfortunately, Chaos! fell victim to the troubled comics market at the end of the century and eventually filed for bankruptcy in 2002. However, its legacy is alive and well today. Many of its characters, including *Evil Ernie* and *Purgatori*, now reside at Dynamite Comics and continue to see print.

Pulido, meanwhile, moved on to a stint at Avatar Press, where he continued to create horror books such as *Belladonna*, *Gypsy*, *War Angel* and *Killer Gnomes*, along with publishing *Lady Death* titles under Avatar's Boundless Comics imprint. After a lengthy rights dispute with Avatar, Pulido is now once again creating and publishing books featuring *Lady Death*—this time through his own company, Coffee Comics.

1990s: RISE AND FALLOUT

NO DECADE IS AS CONTROVERSIAL, DEBATED, LOVED AND REVEILED WITHIN THE COMICS industry as the 1990s. If the '80s were about building new markets, experimenting and pushing the envelope creatively, then the '90s were about cashing in on that new awareness by any means possible.

And cash-in they did — at least for the early part of the decade, which saw record sales and an increasing number of comic book stores. It is estimated that by 1993 there were approximately 10,000 comic stores in the US alone, up from a reported 800 worldwide in 1979. There are many factors cited for this tremendous growth, including the boom in the collectors' market. Whatever the reason, the audience was huge, and comics companies were more than happy to chain out constant product in order to satiate that hunger.

This was good news for horror fans. Vertigo and Dark Horse maintained a steady stream of horror output; Image hit the jackpot with *Spawn* and various spin-offs and similar titles; new companies such as Chaos and Valiant offered several occult-horrorist books, including *Lady Death* and *Shadowman*; and even DC and Marvel were looking to add a bit of darkness to their superhero lineups.

DC, for the most part, was content to let Vertigo handle the majority of its horror output. Meanwhile, Marvel finally remembered that it had a stable of horror-themed characters and brought them back into the spotlight. *Demon*, *Hellstorm*, *Ghost Rider* and *Marbus* all received their own

series again and also were an integral part of the *Midnight Sons*, a group of supernatural superheroes that featured guest appearances by Blade, Doctor Strange, Man-Thing and Werewolf by Night. In addition, the comic *Nightswatch* featured Blade teaming up with a couple of old costars from his *Tomb of Dracula* days, vampire detective Haniel King and Dracula descendant Frank Drake, in order to fight supernatural nasties once more.

Marvel even tried to jump on the *Spawn* bandwagon (and perhaps ease the pain of losing creator-artist Todd McFarlane) by spilling out its own version, *Nightwatch*. The character was aesthetically similar to *Spawn* and battled plenty of vicious opponents but lacked the supernatural trappings that arguably made the Image anti-hero so popular. That may be the reason *Nightwatch* only lasted twelve issues before fading into obscurity.

Fans of scary movies, television shows and novels weren't left out either. Topps Comics published new stories based on *The X-Files*, as well as adaptations of *Juan Garcia de Mola*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and its own popular trading card series, *Mass Attacks*. Epic Comics, a Marvel imprint, offered new adventures in the many worlds created by Clive Barker, including *Hellraiser*, *Nightbreed* and *WeaveWorld*. And Innovation Comics published scores of books based on Anne Rice's vampire novels, *Dark Shadows*, *A Nightswatch on Elm Street* and *Child's Play*.

Like many comics in the 1960s, the quality of these





books was questionable. The '90s saw comic artists gain more prominence (and power) than the writers, and many stories emphasized visuals over characterization and plot development. Fans of non-stop violence and carnage had no trouble getting their bloody fix, as for those seeking more cerebral stories, well, they still had Vertigo and Dark Horse.

This really underlines the strength of the ear choice. Whatever your preference, there was undoubtedly a book (or twenty) for you. In many ways, for horror comics fans, it was the best of times.

And then the roof caved in.

Like the sudden boom in readership years before, there are plenty of reasons given for the comics crash of the late '90s. The most frequently cited one paints a picture of an industry too dependent on the speculative market: collectors buying multiple copies of first issues in the hopes of getting rich one day. Neil Gaiman tried to sound the alarm in 1993 at a trade show of approximately 3000 retailers, where he infamously gave a speech comparing the comics industry to the tulip craze in Holland during the 17th century.

"You can sell lots of comics to the same person, es-



Apocalypse

pecially if you tell them that you are investing money for high guaranteed returns," Gaiman said. "But you're selling bubbles and tulips, and one day the bubble will burst, and the tulips will rot in the warehouse."

Of course, nobody heeded his warning then, and by 1996 there were indeed plenty of rolling comic books filling stock rooms and warehouses. Little Bobby had finally realized that his 3D copies of the gold-folied, 3-D holographic-cover variant for *Spider-Man #1* were not going to be adding to his retirement fund after all.

What followed was a period of uncertainty and massive downsizing. DC, Dark Horse and Image cut back on the number of titles they published; Marvel filed for bankruptcy in 1997 (and was ultimately saved by the formation of Marvel Enterprises the following year); companies such as Valiant, Topps Comics, Innovation and Chase/ closed their doors, and about two-thirds of direct-market comic-book stores went out of business.

For horror fans, the choices narrowed once again. Luckily, companies such as Dark Horse and Vertigo, who had a solid reputation for quality, continued to offer a good, if somewhat smaller, selection of books. But for other companies it meant a reassessment of their catalogs and the opportunity to call titles that were not popular sellers.

Not all of them were horror-themed, of course, but the shrinking market did prompt companies such as DC and Marvel to focus predominantly on their star superheroes. Fewer publishers were willing to take risks on new properties, and even fewer were willing to rock the rapidly sinking boat with potentially controversial themes and content.

And so, as the comics industry entered the 21st century, there was plenty of fear on display. Unfortunately, it was publishers, not horror fans, who received the biggest frights. But that, too, was only temporary.



2000s: THE WALKING DEAD

IT'S BEEN A STRANGE UNPREDICTABLE JOURNEY FOR *THE WALKING DEAD*. IT'S HARD TO imagine that anyone connected with Image Comics' breakout hit series had any idea what they were getting into when the first issue hit stands in October 2003.

Certainly not Rick Grimes, the title's reluctant hero. In the comic's opening pages, the small-town police officer is wounded in a shootout, only to awaken in a hospital to find that his Kentucky hometown, along with the rest of the country, has been overrun by zombies. Soon reunited with his wife and young son, Rick becomes the impromptu leader of a ragtag group of survivors who roam the American South in search of food, shelter and at least some semblance of stability.

Over the course of the series, the zombie threat has become increasingly marginalized as the group learns that the most potent danger comes in the form of their fellow survivors. Zombies—or walkers, as they're known in the series—are at least predictable: meet one on the road and, rest assured,

it will try to eat you. A human, on the other hand, is an unknown variable. He might be a valuable ally, or his agenda might include robbery, rape, torture, abduction and murder (and there's a very good chance he'll still try to eat you when he's finished).

Nearly one hundred and fifty issues into the series (spoiler alert!), Rick has been maimed and widowed, and is possibly in the process of going batshit crazy. He and a few of the series' stalwarts have recently run afoul of the Whisperers—a band of survivors who disguise themselves as walkers and will go to any means necessary to survive. Their meeting culminates in a bloodbath for Rick's band, the likes of which has not been seen before in this book. It's yet another of the gut-punching twists that readers have come to expect from the series, but for which they're never really ready.

The journey has held almost as many surprises for series creator Robert Kirkman (only with less dismemberment and cannibalism, hopefully). Everyone might be clambering for a piece of *The Walking Dead* now, but when he originally pitched the idea to Image's then-publisher, Jim Valentino, the re-





sponsor was a resounding lack of interest.

"Jim turned down *The Walking Dead* at first because he felt that straight zombie comics that are treated seriously had never really sold before, and the truth is that, right up until that point, he was right," Kirkman told *Rue Morgue* back in 2010. "But I wasn't willing to take 'no' for an answer, so I lied to him and told him that everything in the book was a precursor to an alien invasion, that the aliens had brought the zombie plague to Earth to weaken the infrastructure of our civilization so they could take over."

Apparently, no one noticed that Kirkman was essentially pitching *Plan 9 From Outer Space*. Image greenlighted Kirkman's series, with Terry Moore providing the book's black-and-white art. (Charlie Adlard, the book's current artist, replaced Moore after the sixth issue.) The alien angle was complete bullshit, but no one at Image seems to begrudge Kirkman's subterfuge: The series became one of the publisher's flagship titles, and talk of a small-screen adaptation soon began.

Though Kirkman reported there was quite a bit

of interest from TV execs for years after the book launched, things never really got off the ground until Frank Darabont read the comic and decided to adapt it as a pilot for NBC. Kirkman was hesitant; he was afraid the network's mainstream mandate would be a handicap for the show's creative team, forcing them to tone down the book's graphic violence and adult themes. It proved to be a false start, but Darabont wasn't discouraged.

"Frank kept telling me he was going to get this made. He said, 'Don't worry, Robert, I'm out there fighting for it and I'm gonna make this thing happen,' and I was like, 'Yeah, yeah, sure.' I didn't know Frank that well and I thought he was just a Hollywood guy trying to stay positive. But by God, he came through on his word and made the whole thing happen."

Darabont spoke with *Rue Morgue* in 2010 while the first season of the program was in production, and shared his thoughts on reading Kirkman's book for the first time.

"I was very pleasantly surprised because I'll take any kind of zombie story, I love that arena. But the real surprise with Robert's work was the rather adult, serialized approach he'd taken with it. I love the idea of the ongoing saga, and he was doing it so well—he was delivering on all the zombie-story promises without pandering. It felt like zombie storytelling for adults, and I really dug that because I'm an adult these days... or so they tell me."



Darabont exited the production during the second season, but that didn't stop the show from becoming a massive mainstream hit. As of this writing, *The Walking Dead* has just finished its record-breaking sixth season and has been renewed for a seventh. In addition, a spinoff show, *Fear the Walking Dead*, created by Kirkman and Dave Erickson, which documents events during the onset of the walker plague, premiered earlier in the year to similar smash ratings.

Though Kirkman has a great deal of creative input



— he's one of the show's executive producers, and a regular writer — from the very beginning, he seemed content to let the show's writers make their own decisions about the series' direction. At first, that comfort was due in large part to his confidence in Darabont, whom he saw as the perfect person to helm the adaptation. According to Kirkman at the time, both he and Darabont favored a "characters first, zombies second" approach to the material. Equally important, though, was Darabont's appreciation for the horror genre.

"He's a grimy guy," Kirkman says. "He wrote *The Blob* [remake] and *Nightmare on Elm Street 3*; his house is full of horror statues and Bernie Wrightson original art... he knows this world. He [was] the perfect guy to adapt *The Walking Dead* because it isn't just a gory zombiefest. It's also a dramatic character study. We watch their heartbreak and we see how all of them change, and that's the stuff that Frank's done really well in his movies."

If Kirkman worried that his series was too dark and violent for NBC, he had no such qualms about AMC, which eventually snapped up the project. It is, after all, the network that scored an unexpected hit with *Breaking Bad* — a show whose rise on screen includes liquefying corpses and a severed human head perched



on the back of a giant tortoise.

"They let the creators on their shows create," he explains. "They don't really put limitations on how far you can push things or how dark you can go. Everything I've seen on the show so far has been amazing, and they really are trying to push the envelope as far as what you can put on television. I think people are going to be blown away by what they're able to get away with."

For the zombies themselves, AMC turned to makeup artist and RNB EFX Group co-founder Greg Nicotero — a move Kirkman applauded.

"These are the best-looking zombies anyone could ever hope for, [Nicotero] is able to do things with prosthetics that you wouldn't think possible. There's a lot of stuff built around the outside of someone's face that looks like it's inside someone's face — it's just really amazing."

The show has often veered away from the comic's storylines, but the two incarnations of Kirkman's grim and gory opus mesh perfectly. Kirkman has described the show as a sort of "best of" compilation, expanding on the strongest material and glossing over the lesser bits. The show's writers have added new characters — including Norman Reedus' wildly popular Daryl Dixon — and fleshed out the roles of a few minor ones, with

little or no input from Kirkman.

Dabbert expanded on that reasoning back in 2010, and it still holds true for the TV series some six years later. "If we cover the material at the same velocity that Robert does in the comics, we'll run out very quickly. And by the way, there are tremendous opportunities for taking detours off the path of what he has established here. You start digging into this material and you start saying, 'Yeah, but what about this?' and 'What about that?' A lot of people are bringing different ideas to the table and fleshing them out as we go and taking some really wild detours."

Kirkman has taken those detours in stride, realizing early on that a long run for the show would almost certainly mean numerous departures from his comic book storylines.

"I could see [the comic] going for 300 issues or well beyond that, as long as everything is like it is now and I have a lot of ideas. It could keep going for decades. Hopefully the show will run for 30 seasons, and if at some point during these 30 seasons I see something that isn't exactly what I wanted, I can live with it."

Though Kirkman has always written *The Walking Dead* with only a comic book audience in mind, he's glad it's had such a tremendous crossover appeal.



"People never really give comics credit. There's a reason why Hollywood is coming to comics in droves and mining our material. There's an amazing amount of quality stuff there. *The Walking Dead* is hopefully as sophisticated as anything you'll get from any other medium, and there's a lot more out

there. Hopefully the TV series will be a great advertisement to tell people, 'Hey, look! Comics aren't what you thought they were. Give 'em a shot.'"

Kirkman remains one of the industry's most popular and most prolific comic book writers. Along with *The Walking Dead*, he is also the creator/writer of *Invincible*, *The Astonishing Wolf-Man*, *Super Dinosaur*, the



first two *Marvel Zombies* series and *Outcast*. In 2010 he launched Skybound, his own imprint for Image Comics.

Needless to say, he's a huge advocate of the genre and remains a particular fan of horror's potential on the graphic page. He also has very clear ideas about what readers are interested in.

"People don't just want stories, they want stories with characters they can become invested in. When was the last time a non-franchise in any medium really took off? You've got your *Twilight*s and your *Scott Pilgrims* and *Harry Potters* and *Avatars*, which are all designed to continue. People want to get invested in something — and I suppose that's carrying over into horror comics as well. You could read some kind of done-in-one zombie tale or you could read *The Walking Dead*, which is hopefully a roller-coaster ride of emotions that doesn't let up. I'm not saying one is better than the other, but it seems the current audiences like things they can later come back to."

THE HURTFUL DEAD

THE WALKING DEAD HAS NEVER SHIED AWAY FROM GRAPHIC

violence or disturbing imagery, but the book's true power lies in the fact that horrible things happen to characters we care about. Kirkman invests time in fleshing out the players before bloodily stripping the flesh off them. He's created a world where no one is safe and every issue has the potential to be any character's last. To those who have perished under his merciless pen, we salute you! (Mandatory to say, if you're not caught up on the series, stop reading now!)

SHANE — Sure, he dies only in the series, but considering how *Qui Gonnos* pull the trigger, it's an early indication that Kirkman that no one will remain unscathed by violence — and even those who commit it.

LORE AND JUDITH GRIMES — It's bad enough to see Rick Grimes' wife, Lori, shot to death on the orders of the repulsive Governor — especially since she's shot in the back in very graphic detail. But it's ten times more horrific that she's carrying her newborn daughter Judith at the time, who is crushed to death as her mother's body falls on top of her.

MURSHIEL — Another victim of the Governor, who shoots him in the head while the old man is cradling the dead body of his son, Billy.

TYRESSE — One of the original survivors, Tyresse is beaten to a bloody pulp by the Governor and subsequently decapitated. His head refuses to stay dead, however, and it's up to Michonne to put it down for good.

GLENN — He may have thus far escaped the *Eden Ropes* on the TV show, but on the comic page he not only dies, he dies brutally. Glenn is mercilessly beaten by Negan, leader of the Saviors, who bludgeons him with a baseball bat wrapped in barbed wire, crushing his skull and popping an eye out — and that's only the warm-up.

DALE — Dale managed to survive one amputated leg — and more than 60 issues — before a walker took a bite out of his shoulder. You'd think knowing his eventual fate

would be enough, but oh no. Dale is kidnapped by a group of walkers (journalistic survival) who chow down on his remaining leg. He's rescued by his girlfriend, Andrea, who shoots him before he can regenerate.

BEN AND BILLY — Twin brothers who are only two years old when the zombie outbreak hits. Undoubtedly disturbed by all the carnage around them, Ben brutally kills Billy with a knife. Ben is in turn executed by Carl, who believes the five-year-old endangers the group.

OLIVIA, JOEL, GABSON, TAMMY, LUKE, ERIN, KEN, AMBER, LARRY, OSCAR, ROSITA AND EZEKIEL — In one fell swoop, leaders of Rick's group are slaughtered by the Whippersnappers. After they're decapitated, their severed heads are left on planks as a devastated Rick looks on.



MARVEL ZOMBIES

BY GARY NUYER

AS ZOMBIE APOCALYPSES GO, THE SCENE IS NOT UNFAMILIAR IN THE ONCE-BUSY DOWNTOWN core of a blighted urban landscape, a horde of ravenous ghouls pounces on its latest victim. Within moments, Magnus, the "fresh meat," disappears under the rabid peck and is swiftly ripped to shreds.

On the sidelines, a brief altercation: one zombie, unaware his stomach is riven and spilling guts (not his own), doesn't take it well when another proceeds to steal his food, right out of the fissure. The rest of the horde, salied for now, disperses, and many of the zombies sit down to rest. One starts to examine his bloody hands and clothes.

"Dear God - what have we become?" asks Spider-Man. He sees the Hulk clutching his split stomach, Thor gnawing on the stolen remains of Magnus (i.e., Magneto), and shakes his head. "I think I just want to die."

"That's where the disconnect becomes real and horrific," says writer Robert Kirkman, discussing this key sequence in the first issue of *Marvel Zombies*, the 2005 limited series that brought a new level of terror to the Marvel Universe and began a franchise that continues to this day. "These are superheroes [who are now] zombies, capable of terrible atrocities

and unable to stop themselves."

The thing with *Marvel Zombies* is that it's not about just Spider-Man becoming a zombie, or Daredevil, or the X-Men - it's about every single hero under the Marvel Comics imprint being undead and powerless to fight it. On its own, this concept is interesting enough. But horror aficionados will appreciate the central twist driving Kirkman's book, as the superheroes motif is ultimately of secondary importance. Forget for a moment that the cannibals wear tights; what makes *Marvel Zombies* truly different in the horror pantheon is the

fact that it's really about the zombies, not the survivors.

"The thinking was that if the superheroes had all become zombies - and they had - then the story had to be about zombies instead of people," says Kirkman, best known for his acclaimed, ongoing zombie saga *The Walking Dead*. "I told Marvel, 'Fine by me! I write about survivors milling around in the apocalypse all day.' Writing about actual zombies was something new."

New indeed. Conventional zombie characterization has little to do with character. But as Kirkman points out, superhero comics sell because of their characters. So not only did the heroes have to become zombies, they also had to re-



Marvel Zombies



most interesting, which meant remaining self-aware in typical genre entries, the staples of madness, brain death, disease, cannibalism and resurrection paint the picture of the "everyzombie." Kirkman was working with, essentially, uber-zombies, and while his book is rife with moments of stark black humour (Thor eating "disco" from the Hulk's stomach being a prime example), *Marvel Zombies* is every bit a tragedy.

Its protagonists are men and women capable of doing great good — people with a history of, and lifelong commitments to, acts of heroism. But they are helpless in the face of their mutilated hunger, and while they regret their terrible actions, they cannot prevent this behaviour from repeating. Their plight is comparable to vampirism but without that subgenre's air of romance.

"Yes, they have nifty costumes," Kirkman grants, "but there's nothing sexual about decomposing mantises. They are fallen, they are pathetic, and they are repulsive in both their appearance and their actions."

Kirkman adds that the superpowers enhance the tragedy, making the outcome of any zombie vs. human situation absolutely impossible to prevent. There's simply no escape.

"They're superheroes," he says. "They're unstoppable."

The comic genre known as "capes 'n' tight" traditionally involves hope salvaged in the face of bloody

struggles — good conquering evil, albeit often at great cost. Not so in this undead universe.

Marvel Zombies actually goes further than most subgenre entries, letting readers bear witness to the very final moments of a devastated world. It dares to ask: what happens when the last man on Earth falls, when the "food" is all gone, when the apocalypse itself ends? The answer is as uniquely horrific — and as uniquely comic book — as the story itself.

While the new rules of self-awareness and tragedy characterizing the zombie superheroes were challenging enough, Kirkman was astonished to learn that his tale was being granted exemption from traditional Marvel guidelines: for once, the heroes did not have to save the day.

"I disregarded the all-important fact that this is a Marvel comic," Kirkman explains. "I was kinda warned for a day until they got back to me. Their only correction was, they said, Magneto should really say the following in this one panel. Man, that was it. I figured that [artist] Sean [Phillips] was going to be re-drawing stuff throughout the process, and suddenly it

looked like we had 'the power.' That was confirmed when the first issue came out untouched and gory as hell. It makes sense, because how else are you going to make the Marvel zombies credible zombies? It astonished me, the amount of leeway we were given. Marvel's crazy, man — the lunatics are totally running the asylum."

When *Marvel Zombies* came splatting out of the gate in December 2005, it unexpectedly sold out and went into a second printing immediately, becoming the fastest-selling book in the company's history. Faster, Kirkman comments, than the then-report blockbuster *Spider-Man: The Other*.

"When you're bigger than Spider, that's when you know that you've done something right — or at least different."

Kirkman also points out that much of the credit for the series moving so fast is due to the gruesome, eye-popping (sometimes literally) covers, which are zombieified takeoffs of classic ones from the Marvel Universe. Each cover was an homage to an iconic Mar-





we cover – including Spider-Man's first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, and Kirkman's favourite mock-up, *X-Men* #1.

And these covers are just as abject as the inside art, with gore-soaked faces, missing limbs and even Zombie Wolverine sporting a mouthful of eyeballs. Kirkman gleefully mentions reading a thread on an online message board suggesting that his comic might make the government consider banning horror comics again, re-invoking the infamous '50s Comics Code that held the industry in a stranglehold until the late '80s.

At the time of writing the script for the first issue, though, he remembers that, having the go-ahead for what would prove to be the ugliest comic book in Marvel history, his mission had become clear.

"After getting script approval on that [first] one,"

Kirkman says, "with every issue, I just tried to top it. Whatever depraved thing I had done before, I wanted to go further, in search of Marvel's limit. More than once, they told me to 'go to town' and basically do a lot of really, well, unfettered things with their icons."

So he did.

In issue #2, Zombie Giant-Man uses his proportionately gargantuan teeth to decapitate his admittedly annoying wife, Zombie Wasp, after she catches him secretly snacking on the leg of his human hostage (his former friend Black Panther, no less). By the fourth issue, Zombie Hulk is "recycling" the head of cosmic visitor the Silver Surfer by chewing on it, swallowing it, and pulling the undigested chunks out of his breached intestine.

"I'll tell you one thing: it certainly never, ever, ever occurred to me to have a *Walking Dead* zombie keep re-eating the stuffing from his gut-shot stomach. That was pure, unadulterated, 'nothing's sacred' Marvel Zombies," allows Kirkman. "Just describing that was risky, not to mention undignified, but I was being true to the story."

Comic book and zombie fans alike devoured it with an unparalleled appetite (pun intended). Without a doubt, Kirkman produced one of the most refreshing takes on either genre in years – one that saw a number of direct sequels (though Kirkman handed off writing chores after the second installment) and spinoffs. Though the scope of the story has changed over the

years – recent chapters have focused on a group of inter-dimensional zombie hunters led by Howard the Duck, traveling through alternate realities to end the zombie blight – the central concept of zombie superheroes remains intact.

As Kirkman points out, there's just something incredibly powerful about the mightiest of mainstream heroes committing the most unimaginable of atrocities.

"[Spider-Man's] comments to himself about eating his family are funny to the reader for a split second, until you realize that he *did* eat them. There really is a lot of bleak horror going on underneath all of the black humour, not to mention all of the superhero trappings."



STEVE NILES: FRESH BLOOD IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

BY GARY BUTLER

PERHAPS NO MAN UNDERSTANDS THE CONCEPT OF A LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT QUITE THE

way that Steve Niles does. A comics writer, screenwriter and entrepreneur who launched his own imprint and managed to secure a contract to adapt Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* for Eclipse at the age of nineteen, Niles spent years trying to sell his own story, *30 Days of Night*, after coming up with its core concept in the mid-'90s: put vampires in a place where the sun don't shine (Alaska, that is). The original arc centered on the sheriff of a small Alaskan town that is beset by bloodsuckers as it enters a month-long polar night.

In 2002, Niles' tenacity paid off when *30 Days* was published as a three-part comic miniseries by the then-upstart imprint IDW. Ironically, before the second issue was even released, Sam Raimi purchased the rights to turn it into a movie — Niles' original goal.

The series proved to be a massive hit, spawning a number of sequels, spinoffs and crossovers and propelling Niles to a career as one of comics' most prolific creators. Since *30 Days*, his bibliography has

grown to include *Fixed*, *Criminal Macabre*, *Flash of the Heartland*, *Wake the Dead*, *Batman: Gotham County Line*, *Mystery Society* and *The October Faction*, among many other titles. He has also collaborated with legendary artist Bernie Wrightson (*Sleeping Things* on a number of projects, including *City of Others*, *The Ghoul* and *Frankenstein Alive!*).

Rae Margee talked with Niles back in 2003 about his breakthrough success, and the long years that led up to it.



One of your first professional gigs was scripting comic book adaptations of several short stories from Clive Barker's Books of Blood. How did you meet Barker, not to mention convince him to allow you to adapt his work?

I met him while helping book a local film festival. Clive was very generous to even consider allowing me to publish his books as comics. I had never published a thing, but he worked very hard to make sure I got the rights. It was probably because we became friends and it was obvious how enthusiastic I was. I have

no idea what he really saw in me, I was a bit of a spaz back then.



Which of your Books of Blood adaptations is your favorite?

I have two. "The Yattering and Jack" and "Son of Celluloid." Adapting's a tricky thing. I have learned that the best scripts are the ones where the adaptor brings nothing to the material except figuring out how to bring the story to life.

You've also written several other comic book adaptations, including Eclipse's 1987 version of Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*. What were Matheson's thoughts on your version?

Actually, I didn't meet Matheson face-to-face until just a few months ago at a signing. He shook my hand and said I'd done a great job. I just smiled and stammered. Matheson was the guy who not only got me into horror—he's also the first author I ever read and loved. How I got the rights to *I Am Legend* is one of my favorite memories. I wrote Matheson a letter saying how important [the book] was to me and to horror, and how I felt it had been so poorly depicted not once, but twice as a movie [1964's *The Last Man on Earth* and 1971's

The Omega Man]. He wrote me back almost immediately and said that I could have the rights for a hundred dollars. The real kicker was that I had to borrow the cash! To this day, I'm stunned by his generosity and I can only hope I represented the novel well.

Your sci-fi/action comic *Fused*, about a young engineer whose body is melded with an experimental robot suit, is an allegory for the Frankenstein monster, and your series *Wake the Dead* is a modern-day adaptation of its story. Why do you find this classic character so compelling?

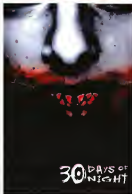
I just love the concept of the monster and the fact that he is created—he's an unwilling participant in someone else's obsession. I suppose I always related to him on a certain level, not that I was made from dead bodies or anything... *Fused* is about a man who becomes trapped inside a robotic rescue suit he helped create. It's a chance for me to tell a cursed hero story more than a Frankenstein story, but it does have these elements. *Wake the Dead*, on the other hand, is a straight retelling in a modern setting. People who were considered adults in Shelley's original novel, these days are really just kids. Victor is only nineteen when he begins his experiments; he's pre-med. The technology is different, too; you'll see everything from computers being used to video game technology.

***30 Days of Night* ends with the death of its hero. Was it difficult deciding to kill off Eben Olenow?**

It almost didn't happen, because I found myself liking him too much. But in the end, that's why I let him go. Whenever possible, I like to make death sudden and kind of wrong because, well, that's how death is.

Let's switch to life, then. Tell us about the birth of *30 Days*.

They run these little fun fact stories in the papers every year about towns that go dark or light for long periods of time. I clipped one, jotted "vampires" on it and shoved it in a drawer. Years later, I'd go out pitching stories and pull it out when we reached the inevitable, "So what else have you got?" And even later, I showed it to IDW. They flipped over the idea of vampires in Alaska. I'd carried it around for so long that I didn't see it as anything new. When the comic was finally announced, IDW started getting calls immedi-



ately. Everything just sort of snowballed from there.

And that snowball contained Sam Raimi.

We pitched Raimi the story over the phone and he said, "It's great, let's make a movie." I'm pretty sure my heart stopped. After years of only getting so far, suddenly the door had opened. The whole deal was worth a million. It was surreal.

30 Days has three distinct arcs, each of which has its own climactic denouement. How much of that was planned?

I worked from my film pitch — by this time I'd worked out the pitch on paper — and I directly transferred the three-act structure to the comic. At the time I thought, "I have all these pitches going to waste, they're already broken down into three acts, so why not do three-act comics?" The hard part came in deciding what not to put in, like the actual vampire attack on the town, each specific townsman's story and a couple of B-plots. The real difficulty came from wanting to write more. That's why the sequel, *Dark Days*, is a six-issue series.

So you omitted the vampire attack on the town for economy rather than effect?

No. I also decided the attack was best left to the imagination. I wanted it to be the worst possible invasion, and leaving it to the minds of the readers does that. I think this was proven with the trade paperback, too, for which Ben [Fleppasmith, the artist] and I added a few attack scenes. While I like these scenes, I think some of the terror was removed, because no matter what we put to paper, the human mind can always think of something worse. At least mine can.

At what point in the writing process did you become aware of what would be the tragic conclusion of 30 Days?

When I realized that the core story wasn't about vampires at all — it was a love story. Plus, it was sacrilegious to kill Eben, so I knew it had a good chance of being effective. Though Eben becomes a vampire, he resists attacking his wife and manages to control the vampire horde single-handedly. This suggests, then, that there is choice in vampirism. In the *30 Days* world, vampires gradually lose their humanity, they become a different being, incapable of feeling love or sympathy.



30 Days of Night:
Dark Days



try like humans. That's part of the loss. In the end, Eben states that he doesn't want to exist if he can't remember what it feels like to love Stella. That was his way of saying he was losing the fight, and his humanity.

At what point was Ben basically running with your baby?

Ben's incredible, that's gotta be said upfront. We met and worked exclusively via email and instant messag-

ing for all of 30 Days, and I don't know what to tell you, other than that we clicked. We have a great comfort level that we hit the second I saw page one of 30 Days. He nailed it. He made the story work.

Tell us a little about your approach to the 30 Days sequel, Dark Days.

Ben and I didn't want to milk the vampires in the Arctic Circle thing, we didn't want to do vampires in Norway. The logical step seemed to be to follow the survivors. I like Stella, she's feminine and tough without being too 72, if you know what I mean. I wanted to see how a normal woman like her would hunt vampires as a way of coping with a terrible loss.

Alan Moore once told Rue Morgue in 2001 that comics are a more mature medium than film because it's small enough to escape film's lowest-common-denominator process. What are your thoughts on that?

I agree — comics have the potential to be the more mature medium. But most American comics don't take advantage of that, hence the endless stream of men-in-leotards, boy-ecologist-fantasy comics out there. It's not to say that stuff is bad, comics just need to diversify.

And you have commented that comics work better when they are miniseries, particularly horror comics.

It's better for a horror comic if it has an ending because that's what we're afraid of — everything slopping, death. That's what makes horror work, being unsure, not knowing what's going to happen.

GEORGE A. ROMERO: NIGHT OF THE FLESH-EATING COMICS

BY GARY BOUTLER

THERE HAVE BEEN VARIOUS *NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD* COMICS IN PUBLICATION SINCE 1991: PANTAGON.

Dead Dog, Avatar, K&W and, most recently, Double Take have all released comics based on the original film and its sequels. These comics vary widely in theme and content, but the one thing they all have in common is the non-participation of creator George A. Romero. That all changed in 2014, when Romero continued his *Living Dead* saga with Marvel's *Empire of the Dead* series, proving he's as skilled with the comics format as he is with film. A decade earlier, however, Romero cut his teeth on a six-part DC series called *Toe Tags*, which, unlike the later work, was separate from the universe he built on the screen.

Toe Tags was the brainchild of DC Comics editor Bob Schreck, who had recently brought the company's Batman books back to the tough-guy trenches. Similar to series such as *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight* and *Spider-Man's Trapped Web*, the *Toe Tags* project was designed to feature multi-issue, finite plotlines by different writer/artist teams, its unique distinction being that each individual story arc would be developed and scripted by an

established horror filmmaker. However, only Romero's arc would be published (DC reprinted a volume of the work in late 2014), making him the only participant in an experiment that was perhaps too ambitious for the time.

"Writing horror comics has never been a goal, per se, but the experience has been... what's a good 'living dead' kind of term?—ah, rejuvenating," says Romero in a 2004 interview with *Rue Morgue*. "Bob Schreck phoned me pretty much out of the blue and told me that he wanted to do a series of horror comics by filmmakers. Before he even finished his pitch, I said 'yes.'"

And when Romero says yes, he means it in the immediate sense of the word. Renowned for his enthusiasm when a project really seems to "have legs, even zombie ones," he took less than two months to write and submit the scripts for five full issues of his all-original undead story, *The Death of Death*. The sixth and final issue was developed in a discussion between Romero, Schreck and a few other DC insiders.

"I came to them with a list of possibilities," he explains, "and we collectively determined which conclusion would be the most effective."





It's no surprise to learn that *The Death of Death* is set in a zombie apocalypse — after all, this is a Romero story. The real surprise is that it's not set in Romero's *Living Dead* film universe, comprised of the famous works *Night of the Living Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead* and the then-in-production *Land of the Dead*.

"The Death of Death is its own beast, and it follows its own rules," Romero promises, "though there's certainly no shortage of [filmic] similarities."

Communal qualities include the requisite *in medias res* apocalypse, mindless living-dead denizens that lurch, lumber and lust for flesh, and darkly humorous socio-political metaphors.

As for what's different, well, how about a zombie slayer who's half-zombie himself? Truth be told, that last part sounds a little bit *Raiders* and a little bit *Blade*, and maybe a little bit *Dead Heat*. Plus, isn't zombie an all-or-nothing kind of deal?

"That's the new question, isn't it?" Romero says, deftly identifying the reason why this story needed to

establish its own continuity. "On one level, the *Living Dead* movie universe is about pure, unadorned horror, but it's really about humanity's failure to adapt. Lack of communication invites social problems, and as society tears itself apart, it allows marauders to take over. This comic, on the other hand, has provided me with an outlet to tell a different, slightly lighter kind of story — more fun, less negative. It's just as gory and horrific as anything I've done on film, though. In fact, it's arguably gorier because there's no FX budget, so there are truly no limits."

Toe Tags' first issue alone lives up to Romero's intimations. On the slightly lighter side, two star-crossed lovers find themselves hopelessly separated in a city teeming with zombies, until one of them comes up with a unique solution to stamp out the competition, or at least trample right over it. (Suffice it to say that while some horror stories go to town, this one goes to the zoo.)

And if gore's your order, the stuff's omnipresent. Though the issue culminates with the savaged and infected hero-to-be meeting his fate in the form of a radical socialist with some flesh ideas, the highlight is an explosive, multi-page zombie massacre that moves from the bottom to the top of a compromised co-building stairwell.

Bearing in mind that Romero spent more than three decades getting into zombies' heads, it makes sense that the man would develop some ideas that simply don't gel with the universe of his *Dead* movies — specifically, the notion of someone fighting and possibly beating the "disease" of zombies.

"At best, this story is nominally interwoven with *Land of the Dead*," Romero says. "I finished the first draft of that script approximately 48 hours before the Twin Towers went down in 2001, and it was rejected everywhere I sent it, because the post-attack world was naturally all about 'soft and fuzzy.' I decided to sit on it and not revise it, just let some time go by — but I did start to think of 'lighter' zombie and horror ideas that could actually be executed in North America's post-9/11 mindset of living with terrorism."

Hence a justice-delivering monster dispatcher who turned a zombie attack and whose undead-wish is to clean up his city. That said, given that *The Death of Death* features a protagonist who sports a decidedly cyborg-style look and some beyond-Batman

Reign of the Dead

Art 3



weaponry, is it not fair to suggest that it's a vigilante superhero story in zombie's clothing?

"Well, if it is a superhero comic story—and I'm not saying that it is or isn't—it was unintentional," says Romero. "My hero has no superpowers. He's not so much super as just smart, resourceful and moral. He's a deeply conflicted guy trying to do the right thing in a world gone terribly wrong."

Batman's *Night of the Living Dead*, then? Or to put it best, *Dark Knight of the Living Dead*?

"It's certainly a comic-driven type of story," Romero concedes, pointing out that he's much more familiar with the old-school pulp comics of his youth than with modern (not to mention postmodern) graphic literature.

"At its heart, the pulps were about a good guy, a bad guy, and oftentimes the mean and rotten world that seems to arbitrarily back the bad guy. The difference is that in my story, there's a dead good guy, a dead bad guy and a world of zombies as well as not-dead bad guys. To me, that's a lot more fun and a lot more interesting."

There's certainly no doubt that Romero had a ball writing the story. The zombie-plagued urban center is purposely named to facilitate the cheekily patrifol city limits sign that reads "Reign/Corruption City, population 0." And the hero's name is an intentional study in contrasts.

"Damien Cross," says Romero, laughing. "There's nothing profound underlying it, but I guess it's funny that it combines references to both the Antichrist and

the Christ."

Twistedly appropriate, really, for a guy who's not quite dead but not quite undead.

"I call these kinds of details my midnight inspirations—things I come up with when I'm really deep into a project and completely focused on fine-tuning it on as many levels as I can," says Romero.

In other words, the half-zombie zombie slayer and *Reign/Corruption City* aren't ideas that Romero's been riding on for years—they were all custom-created for *Tor Tags*. "The villain's name is another original product of my dark sense of humor," he adds. "It's *Attila—Attila the Hungry*."

One area that Romero wasn't drawing inspiration from was the slate of popular zombie films making the rounds at the time.

"I haven't seen *28 Days Later*," he says. "I do make zombie movies, but that doesn't mean that I'm a student of the genre. I saw [Zack Snyder's remake of] *Dawn*—I had to. I also saw *Shaun of the Dead* suffice to say I liked *Shaun* a lot more. I'm sorry, but I really don't think that zombies should run. The fear they engender is a paralyzing kind of fear. It's the idea of a lumbering thing relentlessly coming at you."

Intentionally or not, *The Death of Death* is very much the *What if? or Elseworlds* of Romero's lifelong work.

"It gave me an opportunity to examine what I do from a completely different point of view. This is something that every creative person needs to do regularly and yet so rarely manages."

ZOMBIE COMICS

THE RISE OF THE RAVENOUS DEAD IS ONE OF THE MOST REMARKABLE POP CULTURE PHENOMENA

to rear its head since vampires became big business decades ago. In addition to movies, television shows, books, video games and merchandise of all shapes and sizes, zombies have also overrun the comics industry. It's fair to say there are more comics featuring the living dead currently on the market than any other monster.

At the top of the heap is *The Walking Dead*, whose contribution to zombie lore in print and on screen can't be overemphasized. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss the remaining crop of zombie comics as cheap imitators, cashing-in on a trend. First, this ignores the high quality of many of these comics. But also, as influential as *The Walking Dead* is, it's important to realize that it did not create the hunger for zombie stories — rather, it successfully tapped into the elements that made shambling flesh-eaters so appealing in the first place, both for readers and creators.

"There are so many reasons why zombie stories have grown popular," says Dr. Travis Langley, psychologist and editor of *The Walking Dead Psychology*.

Psych of the Living Dead (Sterling, 2010). "We worry about where this world is going and how things will turn out. There's something appealing about the idea of a worldwide do-over. Not all zombie stories are apocalyptic, though, so there's something else at work there too. We fear losing our humanity in this impersonal, high-tech world. Many of us fear losing our humanity, whether it's to Alzheimer's, schizophrenia or external catastrophes, more than we fear losing life itself. We want to still be ourselves at the end."

The zombie subgenre's multiple levels of appeal, from visceral horror to socio-political commentary, not only accounts for the number of books on the market, but also for their surprising diversity. There's much more on offer than just tales featuring small bands of human survivors squaring off against hordes of shuffling brain-eaters.

IDW's *Zombies Vs. Robots* puts humanity snack-dab in the middle of a war between the machines and the undead. In Zenescope's *Zombies Vs. Cheerleaders*, the living dead have to contend with pun-puns and high-kicks, both Vertigo's *Zombie* and Action Lab's *Zombie Tramp* feature female zombie protagonists, the latter seeking vengeance, the former trying to lead a normal life while





playing detective, and in BDI's *Rise, Zombie Killer*, the story's main survivors are a small group of animals led by a dog and a baseball bat-wielding gorilla.

The comics format has always encouraged experimentation in both content and execution. *Daybreak*, a graphic novel published by Drawn & Quarterly and written and drawn by Brian Ralph, deals with a zombie apocalypse and its effects on a small group of survivors who band together in a desperate struggle to stay alive. However, it also takes the novel approach of casting the reader as one of the main characters.

The story starts with a one-armed man addressing the reader, warning you that it will be dark soon and inviting you into his shelter. Together, the reader and the man (whose name we never learn) become the main protagonists in the book. With the stranger's help, the reader learns about the zombie invasion, picks up a stray dog, and eventually must fight both the undead and other humans. What could have been a lame gimmick instead turns into a highly compelling form of storytelling, completely immersing the reader

in one of the most unusual zombie tales on the market.

For those of you who prefer your shufflers served in a more traditional, *Night of the Living Dead* style, there are also plenty of flavours to choose from. There is, of course, Marvel's *Empire of the Dead*, written by George A. Romero himself and serving as a direct continuation of his cinematic saga. Meanwhile, Avatar publishes several *Living Dead* comics set in the universe established by the original film. Most intriguing of all, though, is IDW's '68 series, which uses Romero's first movie as a stepping stone and transplants the bulk of the action from 1968 America to the Vietnam War, which partly inspired the classic film.

"The 1960s and the Vietnam War were a turning point in world politics, music and culture that holds to this day," explains '68 artist Nat Jones in the May 2011 issue of *Rue Morgue*. "The loss of innocence and faith in government that came out of that period shook American society to its core. There are a huge number of iconic images, personalities and events that we have tapped into, and no other zombie storyline has utilized a setting so unique to explore the rising dead."

Though the modern zombie era may have been born in America, it has since spread around the world and found a home in many other countries, including Japan, where it can be found in a number of modern manga series — though usually with a distinct Japanese flavour.

Tokyo Ghoul, published in America by VIZ Media, may at first sound like

yet another riff on the zombie genre, but it's far removed from *The Walking Dead* and its ilk. Most significantly, the ghouls are not undead, rotting corpses hungry for brains. Rather, they are human in appearance and have managed to fully integrate themselves into a

society that is aware of their existence, though unable to easily recognize them. They work, go to school and carry on the typical, mundane tasks of daily life. But when hunger strikes, they transform into voracious abominations that can devour a human in minutes.





Tokyo Ghoul

When the ghouls unleash, either on human victims or each other, the once-normal-looking flesh-eaters become vicious monsters, with spiky tentacles protruding from their bodies in order to facilitate consumption.

Tokyo Ghoul takes full advantage of the outrageous imagery and excessive violence that characterize manga. Yet these very qualities can be found in most zombie comics, regardless of nationality, and definitely contribute to the monsters' continuing appeal on the graphic page.

More than any other monster in the horror genre, the zombie lends itself to raw, brutal, mindless carnage. Unlike werewolves or vampires, there is typically no remorse, no elegance, no logical reason for their actions, no premeditation; they forgo the instruments of the serial killer and the surgical precision of some acts of murder, instead they tear, bite and shred, overwhelming their prey with hands and teeth and, quite often, sheer force of numbers.

It's a level of visual freedom that creators have been taking advantage of since the rise of the direct market, with books such as *Deadworld*, *The Dead*, *Zombie Commandos From Hell* and *The Extinction Parade* pushing the envelope on graphic depictions of torture, gore and mutilation.

And it's not just the violence zombies wreak on their victims that has sparked the imagination of comics creators for the past seven decades, the very look of the undead themselves tends to inspire gruesome visuals. Popular depictions of zombies – ambulatory masses of rotting, decaying flesh hanging from corpses in varying stages of decomposition – are made all the more horrific because they also serve as a reminder of our own mortality and our own inescapable relationship with death.

Not surprising, then, that many zombie stories take place in apocalyptic scenarios, a striking visual manifestation of despair and loss of faith. The setting also allows artists to render bleak, desolate landscapes and ruined cities – eerie reminders of societies that have fallen victim to a great scourge – and gives writers a chance to tap into some of mankind's most deep-seated fears.

"Zombies resonate on a very Old Testament level," says artist Derek Rock, founder of Rough House Publishing, which recently reprinted the controversial series *The Dead*. "Living corpses defy every single facet of modern science. The only way that phenomenon can happen is beyond our comprehension of reality. What would be even more terrifying than animated corpses devouring the living, would be that it proves, without a doubt, the total absence of God. Or even more terrifying, the total confirmation of one. Much like a downpour of frogs, oceans turning to blood, or plagues of locusts, the dead rising up to devour the sin of man fits right in as one of God's great punishments. I think the appeal of zombies stems from our fear of total abandonment and the dread that settles in with that reality."



2010s: IMAGE COMICS

DESPITE IMAGE COMICS' MASSIVE SUCCESS AND ITS UNQUESTIONABLE IMPORTANCE TO THE

industry, the company saw a decline in popularity by the early 2000s. The decline wasn't so much for the publisher's output as for what it represented to many. Image had come to epitomize the aesthetic and excesses of the 1990s, which nearly sank the entire comics market.

Image was founded in 1992 by a group of writers and artists that included Todd McFarlane, Erik Larsen, Rob Liefeld and Jim Lee, all of whom had become disillusioned with working at Marvel and DC. At the heart of the malaise was the lack of ownership and proper remuneration for successful characters they created while under the companies' employ.

When Image Comics was formed, its primary man date was that creators would retain full ownership of any content they developed, with minimal to no editorial interference. Despite the historical importance of its formation and the new levels of creative freedom enjoyed by its founders, most of the company's early years were spent redefining the superhero genre—often with generous amounts of horror imagery—through books such as *Spawn*, *Savage Dragon* and *Witchblade*.

Initial sales were phenomenal and for years the company rarely strayed beyond this niche.

A noticeable change began in 2001, when Laties stepped down as publisher and Executive Director Eric Stephenson took on the role. Soon after, Robert Kirkman became a partner in the company. Kirkman's *The Walking Dead* had been a huge seller for the publisher since its launch in 2003, and his new position seemed to indicate that Image was hoping to reinvent itself.

And it did. Since 2008, Image has become one of the most critically acclaimed companies on the market, attracting top talent and putting out an astounding number of diverse books, the bulk of which are horror-based. In many ways, Image has replaced Vertigo in recent years as the top producer of mature-reader content. Whereas that company has seen a decline in books and brand recognition due to catastrophic management decisions by parent company DC, Image shifted its focus from superficial, art-driven stories to complex sagas that are redefining horror in the same way the publisher redefined superheroes two decades earlier.

More importantly, Image continues to provide new creators with the opportunity to publish and fully own their



work in a highly competitive marketplace.

"I honestly can't even imagine a comics industry without Image and their endless efforts publishing original content," says Michael Marston, writer and co-creator of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Roche-Limit*. "I, for one, would have no career. My only wish is for Image to be bigger — or that there were five Images. [The equivalent of] comics having an AMC, HBO, FX, etc. Every genre, especially sci-fi and horror, has reached new heights because Image gave creators the opportunity when no one else did. Image, to comics, is essential."

IMAGES OF HORROR

Image has been publishing some of the best horror comics of the last few years. Here are a few titles that every horror fan should have on their bookshelf.

MANIFEST DESTINY

The Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804 takes a horrific twist as the explorers are forced to contend with anti-and hybrids, giant frogs, sea monsters and killer insects. That's in addition to their expedition being made up of cowards, outcasts and angry sailors.

The deadliest threat to date, however, has been the *Flora*, an ingenious twist on the zombie trope. Through a contagious and deadly fungus, people are infected, die, and slowly turn into plant facemasks of humans, who in turn infect others.

"This is a big fan of *Swamp Thing* and the movie *Cryptids*," says writer Chris Dingus. "There's the segment where Leslie Nielsen battles Ted Danson and Cuyler Ross up to their heads and lets the tide drown them. Later they come to him and they're zombies covered in seaweed and all sorts of crap. That image terrified me when I was a little kid and stuck with me. Maybe this was a chance to get it out of my system."

The *Flora* also affects animals, and the scorpion appearance of a plant-zombie deer is just one of the many memorable images cooked up by artist Matthew Roberts in a series chock full of protozoology.

FIVE GHOSTS

Fabian Gray is a treasure hunter in the same vein as Indiana Jones, seeking adventure in the 1930s. However, unlike Dr. Jones, Gray is possessed by the spirits of five ghosts and is able to call on them at will, allowing each of them to take over his body for the purpose of benefiting from their individual skills and abilities. The eponymous roster is made up of the Archer, the Wizard, the Detective,



THE CHARACTERS OF FIVE GHOSTS: JAMES HAY

the Samurai and, scariest of all, the Vampire.

Five Ghosts is a great blend of pulp adventure, mystery and horror. Gray's globe-trotting quest is spurred on by the need to save his twin sister, Silvia, who lies in a mysterious coma caused by the same incident that led to his possession. He's encountered Nazis, a tribe of killer natives who worship a spider god, a skull-faced monster and a demonic cult seeking to possess his power. As if that wasn't enough, Gray finds he is slowly being controlled by his five "guards" and fears he may soon be consumed by their power. This inner struggle forms the core conflict of the series and is the source of much of its horror.

"Horror is a big part of the human experience and is very relatable as a genre," says writer and co-creator Frank J. Barbiere. "I personally think horror involving the body is terrifying. We all go through danger constantly and fear losing control. This is a big theme in *Five Ghosts*, as the main character finds himself being slowly taken over by the five ghosts who are bonded to him."

REVENGE

One day in rural central Wisconsin, the dead come back to life. No, this isn't another zombie story, exactly.



The undead of *Revival* possess all of their memories and faculties, and don't feel the need to kill or eat brains. Writer Tim Seeley has instead chosen to focus on the social, political, economic and religious consequences of such an occurrence in a small town now cut off from the rest of civilization.

Seeley produced some chilling scenarios and story threads from that one, simple premise. For example, some *Revivals* (as the resurrected are labelled) can't cope with being brought back to life and try to mutilate or kill themselves, only to find they can't stay dead. Others become religious zealots, or fall victim to deranged townsfolk or government experiments. In one harrowing storyline, a group of locals capture *Revivals* in order to cannibalize them and export their remains to the elite in New York City, who believe they will be granted immortality if the flesh is consumed.

After Mike Norton set the graphic tone for the series in the first issue, when an elderly female *Revival*, convinced she's been caused by the Devil, begins pulling her teeth out with pliers, only to have them grow back again. The sequence culminates in an orgy of blood and violence that has become typical of the book. But the gore is al-



ways underlined with social commentary that asks some very hard questions and remains on the reader's mind long after the disturbing imagery is gone.

WITCH DOCTOR

Since its debut in 2011 as a four-issue miniseries, Brandon Seibert and Lukas Kober's *Witch Doctor* has become one of the most beautifully bizarre comics on the market, a gruesome mix of the occult by way of science, magic, gross biology, monsters and medical soap opera.

The spongy character is Dr. Vincent Morrow, one of the foremost specialists in supernatural diseases. The first series introduced us to the good doctor and his companions: paramedic and nurse to the paranormal Eric Gast, and Penny Broadbent, a former patient turned helper, who also plays host to a dinner with an appetite for post-dimensional creatures. Together they exorcise vampires, possessed babies, supernatural families, toxic changelings and the Lovecraftian Deep Ones.

The series is known for its outrageous body horror, artfully realized by Kober and cleverly manifested through a connection between the supernatural, biology and modern medicine.

DARK HORSE COMICS

IN 2006 WHEN WRITER STEVE NILES AND ARTIST BERNIE WRIGHTSON WERE PITCHING their new horror comic *City of Others*, the pair ended up on the doorstep of Dark Horse Comics.

"Dark Horse has an established horror line, we fit right into that, and they have welcomed us with open arms," Niles told *Rue Morgue* at the time. "We called up [Dark Horse publisher] Mike Richardson and had a meeting with him. I remember Bernie pulled out one piece of art and the pitch was over. Mike took one look and said, 'Yeah, we're doing it.'"

Horror has long held a place of honor at Dark Horse. Since its creation, the publisher has consistently been a champion of creepy content, from its early dabbling with the *Alien* franchise to the meticulous creation of the *Hellboy* universe and the continuation of the *Buffyverse*.

Richardson, who founded the company in 1986, found a lot of inspiration in pulps and in the EC comics of the 1950s — one of the company's early titles

was *Dark Horse Presents*, an anthology book that experimented with many genres, including superheroes, crime stories, science fiction and horror.

Building on the fantastic success of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* in the 1990s, the company redoubled its commitment to the horror genre in 2003 with the formation of a dedicated horror line, founded by former editor Scott Allie.

"It was an attempt to make sure horror fans knew that this was the best place to come for the smartest, creepiest horror comics around," Allie told *Rue Morgue* in 2012.

The result was a collection of slick, hardcover anthologies by some of comics' biggest names, high-quality reprints of archival classics such as *Cowboy*, and the launch of new titles including Eric Powell's previously self-published series *The Goon* (pictured above) and

Niles' *Carnal/Morbid*, which kicked off the company's long relationship with the prolific writer.

Since then, Dark Horse has continued to empha-



Harrow County II



size its horror output, especially the titles that embody the company's mandate to foster creator-owned material, in which the creators maintain full control and ownership over content and the property. In the last few years, we've seen Jonathan Maberry's *Bat Blood*, Denny Cates' *Shoat Fleet*, Cullen Bunn's *Harrow County*, Greg Rucka's *Men*, a line of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations from Richard Corben, and Peter Hogan and Steve Parkhouse's *Resident Alien*. There have also been plenty of contributions from Powell, Magnolia and Niles to their respective universes.

Dark Horse makes no bones that it wants to get under your skin — something it really emphasized in fall 2012 with the publication of Paul Tobin's *Colder*. I've been reading comics for more than 35 years, so believe me when I say there are very few images in the medium that make me do a double take any more — until I saw the cover of *Colder* #1.

A stunning piece of work by artist Juan Ferreyra, the cover boasts a full-page image of a man slicing a couple of fingers under the skin of his face, from his



lips up to his eyeball. Ferreyra worked long and hard on getting the image right, knowing full well it had to make a strong impact — not just for the sake of the book itself, but because Dark Horse was also keen to use it to promote its fall horror lineup.

"I started with the idea of *Colder* being crazy, so originally I made a split image where on one side he looks normal [but] on the other we could see his crazy side," Ferreyra explains. "It was okay, but it wasn't shocking enough, so Scott [Allie] asked me to give it another try. Paul told me the character can get into people's minds and see if they are crazy and can probably cure them. He's also crazy himself, so I thought, 'How would he get into his own mind and touch it to cure himself?' So I literally drew him trying to touch his brain, although I don't think he actually succeeds in doing so."

The cover proved immensely effective and symbolic of Dark Horse's continuing attitude toward the horror genre: provocative, daring and eye-catching (literally).

DARK HORSES

DARK HORSE PUBLISHES A NUMBER OF HORROR BOOKS that maintain a consistently high standard. Here are a few titles, past and present, that truly exemplify the company's output.

COLDER

There have been three short series in the Colder saga to date, shockingly the story of reluctant hero Declan Thomas, who can step into a person's sadness and possibly cure it. With its vivid manifestations of insanity, each series pushes the envelope visually. Juan Ferraz is one of the best artists in the business, and his work here shows us exactly why. It's disturbing and ghastly, yet ultimately beautiful.

CONAN THE AVENGER

Conan may not be the first name that comes to mind when one thinks of horror, yet he's regularly battling the occult (evil wizards, ghosts, zombies and monsters of all sorts). There's an unpredictability to Conan stories, as they're constantly changing settings and supporting characters. As such, there's a freedom to create any kind of threat imaginable without having to provide a detailed back story or even justify its existence in Conan's world. She just happens, and we all benefit.

THE DEAD RIDER: CROWN OF SOULS

Steadfast western trope — the lone gunslinger, corrupt lawmen, the inevitable showdown — clash with the supernatural in the form of a Bog Witch and her zombie slave. Kevin Fennell's art, which channels Dennis Wrightson and Frank Frazetta, is meticulously laid out, with ghostly borders and visually inventive panels.

THE GOON

I don't think there's anything I can say about *The Goon* that hasn't already been said, but trust me: everything you've heard is true. The brutish, yet heroic, Goon and his gang of misfits have battled zombies, witches,

vampires, ghosts, mutants and even communist giant squids. One of the most unusual books on the market, *The Goon* is over-the-top, excessively violent, brutally horrific and ridiculously funny.

HARROW COUNTY

A new backwoods horror series that casts its spells from the wild world of witchcraft, *Harrow County* centres on a teenage girl who may or may not be a force for evil. This ambiguity is one of the book's strengths, as is its phenomenal setting and themes.

LOBSTER JOHNSON

Lobster Johnson continues to be my favourite character in the Helliverse, primarily because his stories perfectly blend horror and action into a redefining, modern take on pulp fiction. Whether battling Nazis or bingers with occult powers, the tales are a nice throwback to 1930s/40s adventure

yarns. It's a bonus that no prior knowledge of the character is required to enjoy his adventures.

RAT GOD

After a series of stunning Fox adaptations, Richard Corben re-sharpened his pencils for this original tale combining elements of Lovecraft and Native American folklore. While the two may seem like an odd match, Corben has fused them into an intriguing narrative that's accompanied by his usual breathtaking artwork.

THE WITCHER

The Witcher is based on a popular series of video games featuring Geralt the Witcher (a.k.a. monster hunter). Two limited series have been published, *House of Glass* and *For Children*. In each, Geralt comes up against ghosts, witches and sinister shape-shifters. The tales often progress like a game, with our hero facing various enemies before a showdown with the ultimate evil. Luckily that concept doesn't detract from the books, which are solid monster stories featuring some impressive art.



CLIVE BARKER: HELLRAISER

BY APOL UNELLINS

MUCH HAS CHANGED SINCE CLIVE BARKER'S GROSSLY 1986 NOVELLA *THE HELLBOUND HEART FIRST* laid the foundation for the *Hellraiser* franchise. Barker's story, along with the movie adaptation he wrote and directed in 1987, helped spin the horror genre in a wicked new direction. Numerous sequels followed, but without Barker's involvement it would be almost a quarter of a century before he would pen another *Hellraiser* tale.

When he finally returned to the brutal world of inter-dimensional soul harvester Pinhead, it wasn't in prose or film. In 2011, Barker teamed with co-writer Christopher Monfette to create a *Hellraiser* comic book miniseries for BOOM! Studios. Recalibrating the franchise presented a considerable challenge, though: how do you re-energize a property that had wandered into the creative no man's land of out-of-sight sequels and an impending Hollywood reboot?

For starters, Barker and Monfette opted to take the story back to its roots. The first issue of the new series, simply titled *Hellraiser*, picks up where the second film, 1987's *Hellbound*, *Hellraiser* II, left off.

"The idea of going back is a way of reinventing the mythology and darkening the show," said Barker in an 2011 interview with *Rue Morgue* prior to the book's launch. "Darkening the story. Darkening the whole darn world in which this is happening. When the story first took place, the world was a brighter place. And now, I think, the world that Pinhead walks into is a much darker world. I'm interested in exploring the idea of what he does with it."

Initially, Monfette wanted to approach the comics as a direct continuation of the storyline set forth, and the world established, in the first two films.

"Once you get into [Hellraiser] II, and certainly into parts 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8, Pinhead has been done a disservice," he says. "Hollywood doesn't seem to know what to do with him anymore. They want him to be violent but not too violent, but this is a character that is about subversion, and about violence. They want to sex it up, they want to make it younger, but they also want to appeal to the older fans — they don't know what to do. With BOOM!, we have an opportunity to take all the artistic risks we want, and tell a story we want to tell to people who want to read it, in a way that



CLIVE BARKER'S
HELLRAISER



is uncompensated by the \$30 million it would cost to make the movie."

Rather than pretend the intervening years — and super sequels — never happened, Barker and Montelle considered the toll they might have taken on Pinhead, both as a character and as a horror icon.

"We needed to use the time that Pinhead as a character has been sort of restless and tired, and the years that as an icon he hasn't been done any justice, and we needed to weave that into the story in some way," says Montelle.

The result is a Pinhead who has grown dissatisfied with his station. He has solved the mystery of the flesh, and wonders what else lies in store for him. Montelle describes him as "the creature in Hell looking up at the stars, wondering if there's more."

Naturally, there is. In the first eight-issue story arc, Pinhead isn't just restless, he's upwardly mobile. Weary of his role as trader of the Cornucopia, he strikes, quite literally, a deal with the Devil. Now he may try for redemption — something no Cornucopia had done before — provided he finds a replacement. He

has a very specific someone in mind: Kirsty Cotton, heroine of *Hellraiser* and *Hellbound*.

"Kirsty's story always felt unfinished," says Montelle. "When she and Tiffany walked away in the second film, her story never felt complete. It always felt like she had one more encounter with Pinhead waiting for her. This is that encounter. What's going to happen in this series will have lasting repercussions for the vision and aesthetics of Hell, and it's going to leave Pinhead in a very different place. He's going to be a very different demon at the end of these eight issues, and Kirsty is going to be a very different heroine."

Though Montelle did the bulk of the scripting, Barker played a key role throughout the process.

"I think it'll be different from week to week, month to month," Barker says of his level of involvement. "So far it's been quite extensive — very thorough. I've had opinions on practically everything. You know, this mythology has been very kind to me over the years. And I want to be kind to it, and most importantly to the people who are enthusiastic about it."

The pair clearly had ambitious plans for the characters that inhabit the *Hellraiser* universe, but another challenge lay in store for them: The concept of extreme sadomasochism was a dangerous, bloody animal in the '80s, but does it still have teeth in today's world? Now that the edges of the genre's charmed territory are marked by movies such as *The Mexican*, *Cannibals* and *A Serbian Film*, Pinhead and his colleagues might seem tame in comparison.

"[When I wrote *The Hellbound Heart*] there was a sense that I was referencing what I knew of the very early stages of a nascent community," says Barker. "These people that enjoy pain and oftentimes fetishize themselves, it was something that was fresh to me. ... Now, though, I think we've got to push it a lot farther, so much of that stuff is 'been there, worn it, pierced that.' You know, that imagery has come in and out of fashion so many times we have to push it a lot harder to use that imagery in a fresh kind of way. It's definitely going to be a challenge, but then, horror has always been a challenge."

Of course, there's another, perhaps more obvious concern: *Hellraiser* is a horror comic — it needs to be scary.

"Everyone wants this to be the most elegant, stylish, scary thing it can be," Barker says. "It's impera-

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tive that we make this scary. That was one of the first things I said in BOOM!"

To that end, Barker, a lifelong comics fan, took cues from *Walking Dead* scribe Robert Kirkman.

"He was doing an interview about making comics scary," Barker recalls. "He said it's a very, very difficult thing to do. He gave some pieces of advice, which I've been following carefully, because I think he's absolutely right. Comics don't have an easy rhythm to them where flights are concerned. You can't control people's reading habits the way you can their viewing habits when they're locked in the cinema. Part of the essence of being scared is losing control. In the theatre, you're obliged to watch the monster come whether you want to or not. Even with a DVD, you still have to find the pause button if you suddenly find yourself overwhelmed. Reading is a much more leisurely pursuit. You can put the book down. So, yes, I feel it's important to include as much of the scary stuff as possible. When people put this comic down, I want it to be for the right reasons."

According to Moskowitz, BOOM! didn't place any restrictions on what he and Barker could write, or what artist Leonardo Nancho (Helfblazer) could illustrate.

"They haven't asked me to pull back, and I'm asking Leonardo to draw, and BOOM! to publish, some fairly strange and shocking violent images. I am very fortunate, as a writer, to have an incredible amount of freedom. ... Olier's inclination is always, let's go

further, let's do more. And BOOM! has been right there with us."

Heilraiser concluded its initial run after twenty issues and was followed by two miniseries — *Heilraiser: The Dark Witch* and *Heilraiser: The Road Below*, both scripted by Brandon Seifert (*Witch Doctor*) — as well as a Heilraiser anthology comic subtitled *Bastardy*. The comics continued to explore the grisly and intertextual fates of Kirsty and Pinhead, while also throwing another of Barker's creations into the mix: occult detective Harry O'Niang. The success of the series prompted BOOM! to launch further Barker projects, including *Nightwood*, based on his 1990 cult-favorite film, and the original work *Next Testament*.

Barker has since followed-up *The Hellbound Heart* with its long-awaited sequel *The Scarlet Gospels* (St. Martin's Press, 2015), but says the comics have offered him and his co-writers the chance to explore the world of his most famous creation in ways that would have been difficult or flat-out impossible in other mediums.

"It's a richer, more interesting story than anything we've been able to do with the movies," Barker said of the 2011 comics series. "And if the comic runs the distance, which I hope it does, I anticipate a diversification of storylines, which will allow me to have my own photo canon in the universe where I can do something that is wholly my twisted own. That would be a lot of fun."

HORROR MOVIE/TV TIE-INS

THERE'S AN ASTOUNDING NUMBER OF COMICS ON THE MARKET TODAY BASED ON MOVIE and television properties, many of which are horror-related. It's possibly because horror fans are among the most loyal and likely to pick the books up. Or maybe it's because the genre easily lends itself to the graphic medium in a far more satisfying way than a straight-up drama or comedy—after all, there doesn't seem to be much demand for comics based on *Friends* or *The Good Wife*.

What's impressive is the selection of titles available, as comic companies seem intent on picking up the licenses to just about any genre property, regardless of its age or popularity. In recent years we've had comics based on *Big Trouble in Little China*, David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, *Puppet Master*, *Nightbreed*, *Halloween*, *Re-Animator*, *Evil Dead*, *Escape From New York*, *Thelma & Louise*, *The X-Files*, *Millennium*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Dark Shadows* and even *Plan 9 From Outer Space*.

Horror comic-book tie-ins to movies and television shows are nothing new. In fact, they're almost as old as the genre itself, and by the 1960s it was quite common to see comic versions of popular films or programs. For the most part, the stories in these books had little to do with their celluloid counterparts, and quite often contradicted what was seen on screen. They were more interested in cashing-in on a known brand than ex-

plaining that property's mythology.

That began to change in 1988, when Dark Horse Comics began publishing what would be a tremendously successful run of books based on the *Alien* films. The first limited series, simply titled *Alien*, is a direct sequel to the second movie, taking place ten years later and starring a traumatized Corporal Hicks and Newt. All this would be negated by the release of *Alien 3* in 1992, but it made a bold statement at the time—comics could be used to directly continue a movie's story.



Soon, other books began to follow suit. For example, in 1991, Innovation Publishing licensed *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and published three limited series closely tied to the film franchise. The first, released before the sixth film, featured characters from all five previous installments, including the late Nancy Thompson, uniting to take on Freddy Krueger. Innovation also published comics based on *Child's Play*, with a five-issue series bridging the gap between the second and third movies.

An exciting twist on the comic sequel occurred in 2000 with the release of three issues based on *Halloween*, published by Chaos!

Comics The series focuses on Tommy Doyle and Lindsey Wallace, the children from the first film, and their adult struggles with Michael Myers. What makes these books compelling is that they're based on screenwriter Carol Farnham's pitch for *Halloween 8*, which was rejected by



Dimension films in honor of *Halloween: Resurrection*. The comics take place after the events of *Halloween R20* and even include a cameo by Laurie Strode that is infinitely more satisfying than what wound up on screen.

But comic adaptations aren't just ideal for sequels; they're also a satisfying way of exploring gaps in a franchise's timeline or trying to unravel continuity conundrums that keep diehard fans tossing and turning at night. Turning to Michael Myers once more, Devil's Due Publishing released *Halloween: The First Death of Laurie Strode* in 2008, an attempt to reconcile the problems caused by *R20*'s decision to contradict the previous three films. The book takes place after the events of *Halloween II*, released some 25 years earlier.

"One advantage we have in the comics is that we can return to any time frame without worries of casting or budget," says writer Stefan Hutchinson. "It's a great thing about the comic book medium that we can instantly go and show you events from 1978, with characters still young, and in the case of Sam Loomis, still alive."

Despite the fanart's endless narrative possibilities, some fans remained hesitant to pick up a comic based on their favorite film or TV show, possibly because they

didn't view the material as canonical. But in 2007, Dark Horse released *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season 8*, a direct continuation of the series overseen by creator Joss Whedon. Suddenly, the comic stories "resurfaced."

The book's success led to further exploration of the Buffyverse, with both *Angel* and *Spike* getting their own follow-ups. It also began a couple of trends that continue to this day.

First, it opened the doors for creators of the original property to take an active role in the comic's creation. George A. Romero is writing the comic sequels to his *Living Dead* saga, *Exorcism of the Dead* (which is being turned into a TV series), while John Carpenter has co-written issues of *Big Trouble in Little China* and *Escape From New York*.

Second, it introduced the idea of "season" arcs in comic books, the most exciting result being IDW's release of *The X-Files: Season 10* in 2013 (with creator Chris Carter serving as adviser). At the time, it seemed unlikely we would see Mulder and Scully together again on screen, big or small, as an official continuation of their story as a comic was a dream come true, especially for those dissatisfied with the show's conclusion in 2002. The comics format seemed tailor-made for *The X-Files'* brand of long, complex conspiracy storylines interspersed with single-episode monster stories.

"I want to follow the structure of the show," says writer Joe Harris. "Writing consequential, canonical myth and narrative-building stuff that builds upon and subverts what we thought we already knew, then break it all up with single-issue stories about monsters, other paranormal investigations, consequential character-based stuff, etc."

The series proved to be a hit and IDW released numerous "seasons" leading up to the August 2015 launch of *The X-Files: Season 11*. It remains to be seen how the new 2016 TV series will affect the comic, and although there's probably no connection, it's tempting to speculate that Fox used the book to test the waters, or build excitement, for the show's return. All the more reason to support comics based on your favorite horror film or program — in addition to reviving old friends, you never knew what it could lead to.



COMING SOON TO A COMIC NEAR YOU... MAYBE

THERE'S ALWAYS ROOM FOR MORE TV AND FILM COMICS, especially for properties that have never been adapted to the format. Here are some properties ripe for the picking.

SCREAM

Forget the new TV show. *Scream 4* was supposed to be the start of a brand new trilogy, but its crash and burn at the box office incinerated those plans. With Craven's death in 2015, it's even more unlikely we'll see additional films with the original characters, but a comic series picking up where the film left off could give us a peek at what Kevin Williamson and Craven were planning. Even better, if the book is used to reference and subvert horror comics in the same way the film series did with scary movies.



GREMLIN

Another re-breaker. There's been talk of a *Gremlins* sequel/reboot for ages, with no results. *Gremlins 2* showed us there can be endless permutations of the Gremlin form, so a comic could really go wild with new, horrific and fun designs. Plus, it would avoid the controversial debate of whether to use stop-motion puppets or CGI.



TWIN PEAKS

There will be more than 25 years between the original show and the new version debuting in 2017, and with *Peaks'* huge cast of characters, there are countless opportunities for stories set within that gap. It would also be a good opportunity to highlight char-

acters that probably won't be in the remake due to an actor's demise, such as the Log Lady. As a bonus, even if the new show contradicts something already written for the book, hell, it's *Twin Peaks*—it's not supposed to make sense anyway.



AMERICAN GOTHIC

This 1995 TV series created by Shaun Cassidy and produced by Sam Raimi was set in a small town whose sinister sheriff (eccentrically played by Gary Cole) has supernatural powers—and is hinted to be Satan himself. The series' creators butted heads with its network CBS on a regular basis, and the show was often censored or heavily edited. When it ended after one season, a number of loose threads were left dangling that could easily be tied up in a comic series.



HAMMER HORROR

Just picture an anthology series with stories based on the many Hammer films produced, detailing the further exploits of Christopher Lee's Dracula, Peter Cushing's Frankenstein or Ingrid Pitt's Countess Dracula. You could even throw them all into one big story—along with Oliver Reed's Werewolf, Herbert Lom's Phantasm of the Opera, the Rephile, the Mummy and Rasputin the Mad Monk—for the ultimate monster mash.



AFTERLIFE WITH ARCHIE

BY APOL CHILLINGS

DEATH HAS FINALLY COME FOR ARCHIE ANDREWS AFTER MORE THAN 70 YEARS OF HIGH-SCHOOL

dances and mall-shop dates, 2014 went down as the year "America's typical teenager" couldn't escape the Grim Reaper.

In the penultimate issue of *Life with Archie*, released in July 2014, an adult Archie was shot to death while protecting his friend, openly gay gun-control advocate Kevin Keller, from a would-be assassin. Meanwhile, in an alternate timeline, the teenage Archie and his pals spent the entire year fending off cinematic hordes of zombies in *Afterlife with Archie*.

Archibald Andrews, whose trademark look is largely credited to original artist Bob Montana and an eventual revamp by former pinup artist Don DeCarlo, made his final appearance in the December 1941 issue of a comic book series called *Pop*—just two weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

In the seven decades since, pop-culture touchstones have been a fixture in the Archiverse: Archie and the Gang, including his two perennial love interests, Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge, jiltedragged their way through the 1940s, whined away the '50s in a delirium of sock-hop and rock 'n' roll, and flirted with hippie counterculture in the '60s.

Archie's proto-slacker best pal, Jughead Jones, literally became the arch-awk-speaking punk-rockier Captain Thrash in 1963, and publisher Archie Comics made

headlines around the world in 2010 when it expanded its character lineup to include Keweenaw, Riverdale High's first openly gay student.

Like horror films, Archie's adventures have done much to define the culture of the American teenager—or at least our perception of that culture. It was probably only a

matter of time, then, until the clumsy, brookie-faced ginger made his first foray into the world of genuine horror.

According to *Afterlife with Archie* writer and long-time Archie Comics fan Roberta Aguirre-Sacasa, Archie's world is a prime candidate for that most timely of horror trends: the zombie apocalypse.

"It's the fact that they're teen archetypes, I think, which play so well in horror movies," explains Aguirre-Sacasa, on why the Archiverse was ripe for the horror treatment. "Look at any teen slasher movie from the 1980s. There's the nice girl—usually she's the one who survives to the end. You have the mean girl, who's an early

victim, the douchebag, which is the Reggie character, the boy and cheerleader, who's usually the next-to-last victim. Horror is a genre for teenagers, Archie and his friends are the ultimate teenagers. The combination really works."

Though its first issue hit stands in October 2013, *Afterlife* was commissioned from the ether one year earlier, when artist Francesco Francavilla produced a zombie-themed variant cover for the 2012 Halloween issue of *Life with Archie*. There weren't any zombies in the comic itself, but Francavilla's vintage-inspired cover struck a chord with





Aguirre-Sacasa. A few hours after entrusting about the cover to Archie Comics publisher Jon Goldwater, his writer was tasked with bringing the zombie apocalypse to the clean streets of Archie's all-American hometown, Riverdale.

Aguirre-Sacasa didn't have to look far to find ground zero for Riverdale's undead outbreak. The first story arc, "Escape from Riverdale," begins with a distraught Jughead making a late-night visit to teenage witch Sabrina Spellman. Jughead holds the bloodied body of his pooch, Hot Dog, who's been hit by a car (which, we'll soon learn, was driven by Reggie Mantle). Desperate to help her grieving friend, Sabrina stunts the Necromani-con from her witchy aunts and performs a forbidden, Piff Snerdery-inspired ritual over the canine corpse.

Soon, a zombieified Hot Dog attacks and infects Jughead, who further spreads the plague when he shows up at a high-school dance and chows down on long-time adviser Ethel Muggs. Before long, the streets of Riverdale are overrun with deaders, and Archie and his living pals, including Betty, Veronica, Reggie and Moose Mason, barricade themselves inside the opulent Lodge Mansion.

Once you get past Francavilla's stunning covers, the



Afterlife with Archie #2

most striking thing about *Afterlife* is its tone. Aguirre-Sacasa is writing an unapologetically dark, dyed-in-the-wool horror comic. The series is violent and relentlessly grim, besides Jughead's death and subsequent rotter resurrection, for example, Archie takes a baseball bat to the skull of his own reanimated father.

Nothing in Archie's world is sacrosanct, the first arc of *Afterlife* sees Betty's parents turned into zombies, and the gang's favourite hangout, Pop Tate's Checkik Shoppe, set ablaze after it's overrun by flesh-eaters. It ends with Archie and his remaining buddies — not everyone who survives the trek to Lodge Mansion makes it out alive — abandoning their hometown in hopes of outrunning the deader warping.

"Everything is flexible, so long as the characters' cores are maintained," the writer says, of reimagining the twilight realm of Archie Comics' first full-fledged horror series. "That's just something that's entrenched, I guess — trial and error. Like, Archie would never kill his father. But beating his zombieified father to death with a baseball bat? That's okay."

Afterlife also includes wall-to-wall horror references that attest to Aguirre-Sacasa's genuine enthusiasm for the genre. (His credits also include scripting the recent big screen revamps of *Carrie* and *The Town that Dreaded Sundown*.) One scene has characters engaging in a sardonic, *Scream*-style discussion about horror sequels, a few issues later, Sabrina and her boyfriend attend a screening of *The Wicker Man*, whose themes will later be echoed in Sabrina's storyline.

Besides grounding the series in a world where pop culture is defined by horror cinema, the endless stream of genre references also serves to tie together several seemingly disparate horror mythologies — for instance, casting the zombie outbreak as a Lovecraftian curse.

"It was a little bit of the 'go big or go home' mentality," says Aguirre-Sacasa. "We've done mashups before — *Archie Meets the Predator*, for instance — but we're always



pulled our punches. In this case, we didn't want people to read the first issue and say, 'I know if I knew this wasn't a real horror comic!' Also, when you have a horror reader like Francesco Francavilla drawing your book, you don't want to give him something that's too 'safe' to draw, you know? You want to give him the two-page spread of Chulka going after Sabrina the Teenage Witch."

The writer is referring to the events of *Afterlife #5*, a one-shot that focuses on the repercussions faced by Sabrina Spellman after she accidentally causes Riverdale's earlier holocaust. In an issue that kicks off the anniversary titled "Betty R.I.P." (sorry not, Sabrina finds herself in a mental institution run by Dr. Lovecraft and his colleague Dr. Machen. The issue features one cosmic-horror reference after the next, including nods to "The Shadow Over Innsmouth," "Pickman's Model" and other classic Lovecraft stories.

"That was something we'd been planning to do since the first issue, which is why Sabrina steals the Necronomicon from her cante," Aguirre-Sacasa allows. "Francesco and I are huge Lovecraft fans, so we knew we were eventually going to [do] an all-Lovecraft issue, and Sabrina, given her background, seemed the logical way to connect

these two uniquely American mythologies."

Surprisingly, Aguirre-Sacasa says he's encountered no resistance from Archie Comics brass, in spite of the book's graphic violence and overtly sexual underpinnings (in *Afterlife*, Archie's good-girl pals Nancy Woods and Ginger Lopez are having a secret affair, while the already axed-up Cheryl Blossom is getting it on with her hunk brother, Jason, in a *Flowers in the Attic*-inspired subplot). Rather, he's been given more or less free rein in carving out Riverdale's bloody new niche in the world of horror.

"Jon Goldwater was there when the initial idea for this book came together and has been the book's biggest cheerleader ever since," he points out. "I think there have been some internal discussions at Archie [Comics]—like, 'Is this going too far?'—but Francesco and I have been shielded from those."

As of now, there's no endgame in sight for *Afterlife* with Archie, or its recent alternate-reality spinoff *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (a supernatural horror yarn set in the 1960s, scripted by Aguirre-Sacasa and drawn by Robert Hack). The writer says he's already planned out the first eighteen issues of *Afterlife*; the current "Betty R.I.P." storyline will be followed by an arc called "Archie Is Legend."

The plan, he says, is for these Archie Comics horror series, which take place in a continuity that is entirely removed from traditional Archie titles, to go on indefinitely—as long as he and the artists can produce comics that stand out from the glut of horror titles that are crowding comic store shelves.

"We try to make sure that every issue works as an Archie story, as well as a zombie story," Aguirre-Sacasa explains. "That's why the first issue is set against the backdrop of the high school's Halloween dance. That's why there's a pool party in the third issue. That's why the [Archie/Betty/Veronica] love triangle is still front-and-center. That, to me, is the thing that most sets it apart from other zombie properties: our active, aggressive engagement with the Archie tropes and iconography."



NEW BRITISH INVASION

THE LATE 1970s AND EARLY 80s WERE A BOOM TIME FOR RISING TALENT IN THE BRITISH comics scene — especially horror. Mainstream titles 2000 AD, Scream!, Misty and a number of Maelud UK publications, such as Doctor Who Magazine, were spawning a vanguard of soon-to-be industry leaders that included Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Brian Bolland, Dave Gibbons and Neil Gaiman.

As in North America, however, recent years have seen a decline in comic sales, the result being that the already small pool of UK-published comics has gotten even smaller. Of the few mainstream titles remaining, only 2000 AD offers horror stories on a regular basis. There is some relief, however, in the small press and self-publishing industry, where some of Britain's top talent currently resides.

"The only place horror comics bloom in the UK is in the small press scene," says John-Paul Kamath, writer and creator of London Horror Comic. "Horror comics aren't as prominent as horror in other mediums here in the UK. This is bloom when you consider that TV shows like The Walking Dead, Penny Dreadful and Bates Motel are used to headline advertising campaigns for cable and satellite TV providers. In a medium like TV, horror is being used as a lever to pull in crowds and yet is underused in the mainstream UK comics market."

Kamath launched London Horror Comic in print in 2008 after a series of successful web comics that bo-

ges in 2006. The horror anthology, published by Kamath, became the first full-colour UK horror comic to be distributed worldwide through Diamond Comics. Part of the reason Kamath began the title was because he felt mainstream UK horror titles had become too safe and were actively avoiding controversial topics and themes. He aims to fix that with London Horror Comic; his story of a female microphile in issue #5 ends with one of the most disturbing images he ever saw print on either side of the Atlantic.

"Part of the reason horror is underrepresented in the UK is that most mainstream readers justify it to make it acceptable for mass consumption and, quite frankly, people prefer something safe," Kamath explains. "When someone picks up London Horror Comic, it could contain anything. It's not been corporately rubber-stamped, and for me, as a horror fan, this is its appeal. But for others, the fact that it could contain anything is off-putting."

Wanting to escape the trappings of mainstream horror is also a motivation for Thom Burgess, editor of The Spectral Times (the official magazine of greatbritishghosts.com) and the writer/creator of UK supernatural horror comic Malevolence.

"I think it's an interesting time for UK comics," says Burgess. "It definitely feels to be within a transition phase. So although some people are sticking to the same old stories, others do tend to be noticeably pushing themselves away from traditional horror tropes — something that is definitely important and has





always made me wonder why so many people stick with the same old settings and character archetypes year after year, like werewolves, vampires, zombies. There's so much of that now."

While *Malevolents* isn't as controversial or as graphic as *London Horror Comic*, Burgess is nevertheless keen to explore less-traditional ground, or areas within the genre he feels have not garnered as much attention lately. The first issue, for example, is a ghost story that recalls classic Victorian chills while also updating the conventions for a modern audience.

"I find myself internally growling when you see another cover with a large werewolf or a stereotypical vampire. That's what tempted me to push the ghost story with *Malevolents*, as I think it's something that hasn't been messed around with in comics form that recently. Lately I've found myself going back to stories that have a darker edge to them, rather than being all-out horror: it's often those that amaze you the most, as you don't see the score coming."

This quest to redefine horror may be exactly what the UK comic scene needs to inspire a new wave of creative expression, just as it did back in the 1970s and '80s.

While American comics were knee-deep in a resurgence of vampires, werewolves and mutants, authors such as Alan Moore were reshaping horror by melding it with the superhero genre in *Marvelman* or with political commentary in *V for Vendetta*. This experimentation led not just to a revision of the genre, but to a brand new market beyond the UK.

"The state of the current market comes down to how the majority defines horror," notes Kamath. "I've had people walk past my booth at comic cons holding slabs of *Walking Dead* compendiums. These same people have told me point-blank that they don't like horror. I came to the conclusion that other people's definition of horror – the popular definition – is that horror is something empty-headed and badly produced. The minute that something lies. *The Walking Dead* finds a massive audience, it's promoted in people's minds as something better than horror. In this way, horror comes face a battle of perception here in the UK."

Kamath believes that in order to change that perception, UK creators need to work harder to determine the purpose of horror in the modern world instead of relying on past glories.

"I honestly think the horror scene needs to retire into the shadows for a while and re-evaluate what it's there for," he admits. "The world we live in now is far different from the one that created traditional horror comics. Modern horror comics have a danger of drifting into fantasy or using horror to do something other than scare someone or make them uneasy or make them think, or all three. There will always be a need for horror to rise out people's fears and anxieties. Figuring out how horror comics can put the squeeze on people to do that should keep me busy for the next ten years."



RECOMMENDED READING

London Horror Comic
londonhorrorcomic.com

Malevolents
malevolents.co.uk

HORROR COMICS FOR KIDS

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED TO THE COMICS INDUSTRY AS IT STRUGGLED TO ATTAIN LEGITIMACY. If you ask it to appear to adult audiences (which it does) the last three decades plying boundaries and edging into mature, often controversial territory. From superheroes and fantasy to science fiction and horror, no genre has been left untouched as publishers continue to proclaim that "Comics aren't just for kids anymore!"

But in the wake of all that four-colour carnage, younger readers have been seemingly boxed to the curb, left to find solace in the pages of supermarket Archie digests and the occasional issue of *The Simpsons' Treehouse of Horror*.

It could be argued that, in order for modern comics to maintain their current level of creativity and maturity, the sacrifice of the children's market was an unfortunate but inevitable casualty. And yet the industry does itself no favours by all but neglecting a potentially large and profitable demographic eager to dive into compelling, thought-provoking stories. The *Star Wars* and young adult franchises such as *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* – both in print and on screen – prove there's an audience of teen and preteen readers apex than happy to consume horror-themed tales that deal with mature issues while still cravelling the adventure and excitement of youth.

Luckily, over the last few years, a number of creators

have risen to the challenge of crafting horror stories for younger readers, with fantastic results. Some series, such as Ted Nuliffe's excellent *Courtney Crumrin*, deal with familiar topics: outcast Courtney is a young girl who learns her family has a history of performing magic, and teams with her uncle Abeykhan, who embarks on a journey filled with sorcery, mystical creatures and evil witches. Of course, she also tangles with the usual adolescent pitfalls such as friendship, first love and homework.

Slightly more unorthodox is the *Howard Lovecraft* series, a brilliant reimagining of the famous author as a small boy, travelling through mystic ether-realms with a pet Old One named Spot. Like the *Chuckle* series, the *Howard Lovecraft* books deal with adolescent themes without shying away from topics such as death, and it's all wrapped up in a blanket of sci-fi tropes.

"I think there comes a time in children's lives when they realise the charm of a good scary story," says Howard Lovecraft himself, Bruce Brown. "Look at the popularity of the *Goosebumps* series as a perfect example. As far as the writings of H.P. Lovecraft, they are clearly not for children. Yet, when I began to look at the characters of his work and the mood of his tales, it struck me how easily it could be adapted to a children's story."

The *Howard Lovecraft* series also nicely illustrates one of the advantages of works aimed at a young adult or



Through the Woods
by Emily Carroll



all-ages audience, no concept is too silly or outrageous, because your audience is tailor-made to accept even the most far-fetched idea—even a group of talking animals torturing the wailing dead. In *Rex, Zombie Killer*, the eponymous character is a Golden Retriever who leads a ragtag pack of other apocalypse-surviving animals in slaying cops, a cat and a baseball bat-eating gorilla.

Yet, even when creators are aiming a book at a specific demographic, things don't always turn out as planned.

"I was surprised by the number of younger kids reading it," says Rob Anderson, writer and creator of *Rex, Zombie Killer*. "We rated the book TEEN+ [roughly equivalent to PG-13], but we get emails from kids and their parents where the kids are as young as seven or eight years old. One letter-writer was reading the comic to his granddaughter, who loves zombie movies. Another letter-writer said his daughter took the comic to school for show-and-tell. On the one hand, I hope the class didn't have too many nightmares. On the other hand, it's nice to think we're reaching out to a new generation of potential horror fans."

And while many of these books are the perfect primer for nascent horror fans, there's plenty to offer the seasoned reader as well. Emily Carroll's *Through the Woods*, for example, though aimed at teens, is filled with plenty of disturbing imagery that wouldn't be out of place in a Vertigo book: a dismembered corpse held together by red ribbon, barren wastelands, psychosis in the violent throes of possession, and faces that fall away to reveal squaring tentacles underneath. Consider these with sophisticated themes of isolation, abandonment and insecurity, and

you'll find stories that'll resonate with adult readers just as much as the target audience.

All these books show that, even if they're aimed at younger readers, they can still be thought-provoking and effectively use horror conventions to convey subtext and themes along with the usual thrills. In fact, it's tempting to speculate that it's precisely because they're aimed at a younger readers that a great deal of care and effort is expended on elements that might be taken for granted if they're strictly created for adults.

"I definitely felt a responsibility because I was writing this for younger readers," says Brown. "I did not want to 'talk down' to children; I think people underestimate [kids'] intelligence. Children know when you are talking down to them, and I think they find it insulting. In the end, I wanted tales that younger readers and adults would enjoy."

RECOMMENDED READING

Gauntlet by Cullen Bunn
Oni Press

Howard Lovecraft and the Three Kingdoms
Arcana Studios

Rex, Zombie Killer: The Complete Collection
IDW

Through the Woods
Margaret K. McDermott Books

Proseids, Vampire Slayer Complete Edition
Top Shelf Productions

THE STATE OF INDIE HORROR

LIKE THE 1990s, RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN A BOOM IN INDEPENDENT COMICS ESPECIALLY within the horror genre. The main difference, however, is that creators now have more avenues to get their works into the hands of readers.

Even during the height of the indie scene in the '60s, there were limited options when it came to publication and distribution. Creators could either sell their comics to an existing publisher and increase their chances of proper distribution, or opt for the D.I.Y. route: find a printing house, produce their own books and use guerrilla tactics to get their titles into circulation, such as hand-delivering them to shops.

The Internet, however, has drastically altered the scene and offered writers and artists an affordable opportunity to reach mass audiences. Arguably the easiest way for comic creators to get their work in front of a readership is to simply post it online. You can start your own web comic, like Drew Edwards did back in 1999 with *Halloween Man*, which haunted the Internet as a cult favourite for more than a decade before being relaunched through *Monsterverse* and *comixology*.

Then there's Sam Costello, creator and writer of the *Spill Up* horror anthology, who has been posting stories on his website, spillupcomic.com, since 2006. (The web comics are free to read, but he also sells his tales in self-published print editions.) Costello believes comics are still the most effective way for creators to share their vision with the world.

"Comics have the lowest barrier to entry of any popu-

lar medium," says Costello. "No one can just go out and make a feature film or TV show. With comics, all you need is some paper, ink and — give or take — the ability to draw. With comics' ease of entry and the acceptance of self-publishing, it seemed that if I wasn't finding the kind of horror comics I wanted to read, I should try to make them. And so I did."

The Internet has also given rise to another popular method for creating and distributing product: crowd sourcing. Through channels such as Kickstarter or Indiegogo, creators are able to raise funds and secure a guaranteed audience. Though somewhat controversial if done by large corporations — as Archie Comics learned the hard way when they initiated a Kickstarter campaign for new titles, only to cancel the deal days later after an outcry from critics and fans alike — it can prove to be a good outlet for smaller publishers or individuals.

It worked beautifully for Mark Andrew Smith and James Stokoe's baseball horror yarn *Sullivan's Sloggers* back in 2012. Originally scheduled to be published and distributed through comic stores, Smith took a different tack when pre-orders didn't meet expectations. Realizing they would lose money if they published traditionally, Smith turned to Kickstarter and ended up raising more than \$40,000 in pledges, far exceeding the original goal of \$6,000.

Another available option is print-on-demand services: digital printers who can make professional-quality comics in small quantities, usually with no set-up costs. This is an option favored by many self-publishers, especially





these looking to sell copies of their work at conventions.

"The greatest boon to indie publishers, besides the Internet, is print-on-demand technology," says Steph Daniels, creator and writer of *Zombie Commandos From Hell*, a series he started 11 years ago online and eventually continued in print. "This is what allows me to put out so many books, and even do alternate covers, without going broke and filling up a garage with boxes of comics. The online distribution channels make distributors like Demand seem like dinosaurs since they don't take as big a cut, have hardly any restrictions on content (and have no) restrictive conditions on quantities."

The ability to complete a project as creators see fit, without outside editorial interference, is one of the big appeals of self-publishing, and something horror fans in particular can benefit from. The genre is often home to extreme and graphic violence, intense sexual situations, and cartoon threats that some mainstream publishers may want to avoid, or at least tone down. Many indie horror comics, such as *Zombie Commandos*, take advantage of this editorial freedom to produce the kind of raw material rarely seen anywhere else.

But it's not just controversial material that can thrive

in an indie environment. Sometimes all it takes is an off-beat concept, like Dave Kelly and Lara Anzil's *Tales of the Night Watchman*, a comic that combines horror and supernatural elements with superheroes, romance, pulp adventure and good old-fashioned monsters — with a hearty helping of slice-of-life on the side.

"The indie comics market is a tricky beast," says Kelly. "The great thing about producing comics outside the mainstream is that you can give anything a shot. Insofar as *Tales of the Night Watchman* is concerned, I've had people tell me they love the horror elements, but there's also a number of people who love [the character] Serena, the androgynous teenage punk who lives in a tent on a Brooklyn rooftop."

Ultimately, the ones benefiting from this surge of indie output are readers, and not just with regards to the amount of new material available. Just as creators can take advantage of the new tools and channels at their disposal, it has also never been easier for fans to find this material. Whether it's through a digital comic store, direct websites or visiting one of the many comic cons or expos conducive to small-press promotion and distribution, there are virtually unlimited options for those seeking an alternative to mainstream offerings.

And for those of you thinking of starting a comic of your own, there's never been a better time to flex your creative muscles — though it's always a good idea to take things slowly.

"From a practical standpoint, start small," advises Kelly. "Plan for a series, if you like, but tell shorter or self-contained stories. This will make you a more concise storyteller. It will force you to concoct a beginning, middle and end within a reasonable page count. Don't try to do a twelve-issue miniseries right out the gate. Dream big, publish incrementally."

RECOMMENDED READING

Midwestern Mike
halloweennmcomics.blogspot.ca

Split Lip
splitlipcomic.com

Sullivan's Sluggers
sullivanssluggers.com

Zombie Commandos From Hell
bloodgorecomix.com/zombiecommandos

Tales of the Night Watchman
sowhatpress.com

NEW PULP

THE PULP STORIES OF THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY CONTINUE TO CAST A LONG SHADOW OVER THE COMICS

Industry, including everything from superhero series to adventure, crime, horror and suspense stories. The last few years have seen many titles directly slugging the classic pulp style, either thematically or by resurrecting old characters.

Undoubtedly, the most popular of these revivals: The Shadow, a character who, despite his name, has remained in the spotlight since his creation in 1939. The psychic-powered vigilante with the ability to "cloud men's minds" has starred in several comic book series, most notably for DC and Dark Horse, but since 2011 his home has been Dynamite Entertainment, which has made the character's mystical origin a key element of his series.

This emphasis on the supernatural has left the door open for a number of horror-themed storylines. One story arc, for example, has a spectral woman in white brutally murdering her victims in such a way that eyewitnesses believe they're seeing a ghost. Another storyline has The Shadow seemingly tugging with the undead as he confronts a character known as the Zombie Queen of Chinatown. Combined with the bloody violence found in every a Shadow tale, this series reveals the character's dual horror-centric side.

The Shadow is but one of many pulp characters that

Dynamite has brought back to the comic page. There's also The Spider, a character created in 1933 and very much in line with The Shadow, both visually and in his methods of dealing with criminals. He lacks The Spider's supernatural powers, but that hasn't stopped the series from drifting into the realm of horror. In fact, the first storyline has The Spider also taking on the living dead and a self-proclaimed Zombie Queen (though not the same

character seen in The Shadow). Further issues pit him against a serial killer, mass murderers and a psychotic villain named The Fly.

Joining these two gritty pulp heroes are Miss Fury, the Black Bat, Doc Savage, the Avenger and the Green Hornet. While not as heavily steeped in horror conventions as the Shadow and Spider series, each work is filled with over-the-top violence, the odd supernatural artifact and plenty of disturbing imagery. The Avenger, for example, features an array of invisible men — or nearly invisible, as in many cases the subject's brain, eyeballs and other internal organs are still on display, making for a rather grotesque visual.

Dynamite has also allowed the characters to cross over, primarily in two limited series titled Masks (2012) and Masks 2 (2013). Of the pair, the second series is more likely to appeal to horror fans as it features a villain named the Red Death, who takes her cue from the Edgar Allan Poe story and is prone to throwing elaborate and bloody





disappears that week that it was his life.

But the current pulp trend is not limited to pure comic publication. Steve Niles and Bernie Wrightson have collaborated on a number of projects for IDW that have captured the pulp aesthetic with modern horror tropes.

Dead, She Said (2008) is the story of hard-drinking private eye Detective Coogan, who wakes up one morning to find he's a walking corpse with no memory of how he got that way. Desperately trying to piece together the events leading up to his own murder, Coogan's investigation leads him to mad scientists and ghostly patchwork creatures brought to life. In typical, Nilesian Wrightson fashion.

The two creators revisit the pulp-detective genre in 2009's *The Ghoul*, which also features an undead investigator. The hulking title character is a paranormal expert who must team up with the jaded and very human Detective Kluge to solve a bizarre Hollywood murder.

Both Coogan and *The Ghoul* make guest appearances in 2010's follow-up series *Doc Macabre*, which swaps the previous stories' detective trappings for a science-fiction vibe. Doc is a teenage white kid who whips up inventions to deal with supernatural menaces such as zombies, ghosts and other assorted monstrosities. Like its predecessors, the book is filled with plenty of impressive body horror from Wrightson, whose artwork remains as sedate and compelling as it was 40 years ago.

The proper visuals are crucial if you're trying to quickly convey the look and feel of a pulp book, and the best artist for that job in comics today might just be Francesco Francavilla. The Italian artist has quickly made a name for himself with his retro style and dynamic images. His work on Scott Snyder's run of *Detective Comics* harks back

to his early pulp days, and his artwork resembles the page sensibilities to *Captain America*, *Black Panther* and *Awake*.

Francavilla's joyful covers continue to grace practically every pulp title in Dynamite's stable, and his work can be found regularly in the pages of *Witching with Archie*. The artist has also tried his hand at writing with his own creation, *The Black Beetle*, published by Dark Horse Comics. *Black Beetle* is the epitome of Francavilla's pulp fixation: an old-fashioned hero draped in black, gun in hand and an arsenal of gadgets at his disposal as he trades punches with gangsters, Nazis, dark-magic cults and the odd zombie.

The Black Beetle joins other pulp-favoured books at Dark Horse, including Eric Powell's *The Book*, a series that adopts a 1930s look along with cadaveric villains, teenage fables, mobsters and ridiculous levels of violence. Powell doesn't shy away from supernatural necessities, however, and the book is full of ghosts, witches, zombies, vampires and bog creatures — most of which are responsible for admirably high levels of carnage.

Even Mike Mignola's *Molloy* universe is not without its pulp hero, London Johnson, whose calling card — a lobster-claw symbol burned into the forehead of the criminals he kills — is a direct reference to *The Spider*. Johnson's adventures are also set in the '30s and deal with the usual catalogue of mystical threats, gangsters and World War II villains.

These books, and others like them, continue to carry on the traditions laid down in pulp magazines, maintaining an important link between modern horror comics and the fiction that laid the groundwork for their almost a century earlier.



THANK YOU

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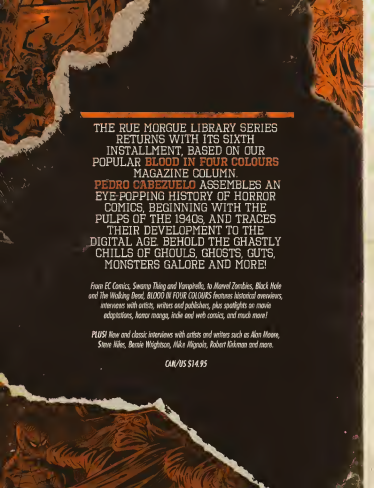
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